ASLEEP IN THE ARMS OF GOD

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A work of creative fiction in the form of a short novel, *Asleep in the Arms of God* is a limited-omniscient and omniscient narrative describing the experiences of a man named Wafer Roberts, born in Jack County, Texas, in 1900. The novel spans the years from 1900 to 1925, and moves from the Keechi Valley of North Texas, to Fort Worth and then France during World War One, and back again to the Keechi Valley. The dissertation opens with a preface, which examines the form of the novel, and regional and other aspects of this particular work, especially as they relate to the postmodern concern with fragmentation and conditional identity. Wafer confronts in the novel aspects of his own questionable history, which echo the larger concern with exploitative practices including racism, patriarchy, overplanting and overgrazing, and pollution, which contribute to and climax in the postmodern fragmentation. The novel attempts to make a critique of the exploitative rage of Western civilization.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ASLEEP IN THE ARMS OF HISTORY: A CLOSER LOOK AT

ASLEEP IN THE ARMS OF GOD

Introduction

The following short novel, *Asleep in the Arms of God,* is set in north Texas, in the early years of the twentieth century. The main character is Wafer Roberts, the scion of a prominent farm family in Jack County's Keechi Valley. The story is told almost wholly from his point of view. Wafer is born in 1901, at the century's turn. Born into one kind of world, a nineteenth-century world, he finds himself, upon his somewhat premature majority, in another sort altogether; a world that refuses to be still, a twentieth century world. That world is, of course, the direct predecessor of our own, materially in transition from nineteenth century certainty, to an angst-ridden indeterminancy that we, a century later, find easily, or *un*easily, familiar.

In Texas as elsewhere, there were a few stops along the way of that transition—we might take the Somme, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Hiroshima, and My Lai as more-or-less representative ossuaries, occupying prominent points in the broader itinerary. Other, more local monuments to the industrialized style of prosperity, and the ethical vacuum it creates, include Port Arthur and Beaumont, on the Texas gulf coast, their fragrant perfumes wafting ever inland. Still others, elsewhere, Three Mile Island, Love Canal, or the now near-dead inland sea of Russia, the Aral. Or perhaps a certain petrochemical plant in north Fort Worth, that I myself know well, consisting of 20 acres or so of land, seared so violently by pollution in the last few decades, that I doubt the Thirtieth century since Christ will see a sprig of grass there, much less the Twenty-first—representative all, with still more unmentioned besides. They exist because they are profitable, and in that word—*profitable*—we find the first clue to the mentality that *makes* them possible. It

is the same mentality that makes of that "ethical vacuum," noted above, a cultural norm.

There are less dramatic instances of the sort of thing I am talking about. The lives of women in my parents' generation—the generation about which I am here writing—were often marked by the same kind of exploitative behavior, and they still are much too often today. Certainly, in the relatively recent and even ongoing history of the struggle of African Americans and other ethnic and economic minorities for civil rights, we find epic stories of resistance to exploitation. Yet all of these exploitations are far from exceptional. Notable or not as matters of history, they are actually woven, more-or-less undetectably, into the fabric of our daily lives. They exist much less in the extraordinary, and more in the ordinary. We live embedded unbeknownst in the midst of vast ecological displacements, little short of the catastrophic, just as we lived, and live, embedded in the moral sloth of segregation.

Things in my parents' day were not so different from now as it may seem. Undeniably, such things are difficult to separate, strand from strand; it requires to do so something like R.G. Vliet's "high linguistic and intuitive capabilities . . . to probe and release . . . individual and community psyches" (qtd. in *Texas* 105); "individual and community psyches" that have survived just such upheavals and dislocations. I hope to do that in the present work, and do it in such a way that the specific context of Texas will become representative of much more than itself merely, while also remaining true to the specific place and time.

The present work is a short novel. It is written as a sort of inversion of the early Victorian/late Romantic "novel of sensibility," where emotions are heightened and exaggerated, in order to increase the drama and emphasize the message. But this is a novel of *in*sensibility. Rather than the challenge of heightening emotion, and exaggerating it, the problem here is how

to get it across without the characters themselves ever showing or stating it clearly, or indeed, ever being particularly aware consciously that they even *have* emotions. There is a kind of meanness that results, that has evolved in Texas (and probably elsewhere, too) from just such determined resistance to introspection. In Texas, it has now a stature approaching the institutional. It is visible in the much-much-worse-than-curmudgeonly utterance of assorted pundits and politicians, and I mean to show it in this novel. I mean to portray the origins of it, and the personal and social cost.

Preliminary Questions of Genre

The original conception of this story was very different from its final form. I had intended to write a novella, of no more than 50,000 words, and a series of six or so short stories, some of them completed in advance, all related to the history of one or two families settled in Jack County, Texas, in the region of the Keechi Valley, from about 1901, right up into the 1990s. But the story of the novella, encompassing the first quarter of the twentieth century, grew exponentially under my hand, topping out initially at better than 73,000 words. I was obliged to do away with both the planned and the completed short stories, and obliged also to rethink the genre in which I was writing.

A *novella*, something like the "beautiful and blest" *nouvelle* of Henry James (Irwin 13), is defined by Holman and Harmon as a term "particularly applied to the early tales of Italian and French writers—such as the Decameron of Boccaccio." The novella is of interest to students of English, because many English writers used Italian and French works as sources, and also because it is among the primary forms giving rise, in the eighteenth century, to the modern novel (Holman & Harmon 325). The term is applied also to a type of short novel developed in

Germany in the nineteenth century. More directly from the English—again according to Holman and Harmon—there is the "work of prose fiction of intermediate length between the short story and the novel" (321). "[The] *novelette* displays the compact structure of the short story with the greater development of character, theme, and action of the novel," for example, "Melville's *Billy Budd*" (324).

An authority of more direct concern to the present project, Katherine Anne Porter, has this to say in the introduction to *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*:

> Please do not call my short novels *Novelettes*, or even worse, *Novellas*. Novelette is a classical usage for a trivial, dime-novel sort of thing; Novella is a slack, boneless, affected word that we do not need to describe anything. Please call my works by their right names: we have four that cover every division: short stories, long stories, short novels, novels . . . [They] seem very clear, sufficient, and plain English. (vi)

All of which is perfectly fine (and perfectly "plain English") but I wonder if she meant to consign the work of Boccaccio to the status of the "slack, boneless," and "affected," much less Melville to the status of a "trivial, dime-novel sort of thing." Melville's valedictory *The Confidence-man* has so much resonance, after all, with Porter's own novel, *Ship of Fools*. She is also somewhat at odds with Holman and Harmon, who put the novella much closer to the neoclassical Renaissance than they do the novelette. With the term *short novel*, I think she really refers to the sort of thing that Henry James did in *The Turn of the Screw*—very much novella or novelette-like; certainly, she elsewhere lionized James[1]. But she does not define her terms rigorously, content merely to dismiss an imprecise nomenclature for equally ill defined terminology of her

own.

Holman and Harmon define the short story as among the oldest of literary genres, with a pedigree extending back into Egypt. The genre begins to assume its modern shape at about the same time as the novel and the novella, or novelette, beginning with short, picaresque novels such as *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes*, of the sixteenth century, and climaxing in the nineteenth century, with the work of writers such as Maupassant, Chekov, Hoffman, and Poe. In terms of its qualities, the short story is a form that "finds it unity in many things other than plot," including "effect, theme, character, tone, mood, and style," while tending "to reveal character through actions," rather than interior monologue or stream-of-consciousness (Holman & Harmon 443). *Asleep in the Arms of God* is almost four interconnected short stories, yet a short story must stand alone, and be a thing unto itself. Certainly each of the four parts consists of a distinct action, more-or-less whole within the limits of the section, and I would also go so far as to assert that Parts I and IV *do* stand alone. Part II and Part III, however, are just too dependent on each other, *and* on Parts I and IV, to stand of themselves, and so *Asleep* is not, strictly speaking, the connected series of four long short stories it might be taken for. Of course, the idea of a series of interconnected short stories has become much more important in recent times. But *Asleep* is something else, hidden, at least for now, in the imprecision of terms like James's *nouvelle*, novelette, or novella, and Porter's short novel.

We have the modern idea of the relatively brief prose narrative, from the short-short story of 500 or so words, to the lower limit of the short novel—the long short story or "long story," by Porter's apparent definition—at 15,000 words. Each of the four sections of *Asleep* is about that length. Poe laid down these and other definitive characteristics of the short story form in his

well-known review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. Because of the work of moderns like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Porter herself, and of postmoderns like Raymond Carver, Tim O'Brien, and Louise Erdrich, the short story and the short story series have become among the most dominant forms of twentieth century English-language fiction[2] (Holman & Harmon 443), though of course, the novel remains extremely important.

Asleep is not a series of short stories. And despite the sufficiency of its length, it is still something other than what we usually mean when we speak of a "conventional" novel. It is not a close dissection of character, such as we associate with the novels of Charles Dickens; nor is it a novel of manners, such as those of Jane Austen or William Makepeace Thackeray; nor is it a novel of the soil. It *might* have been a novel of the soil, and it does contain elements of that, in the isolated setting of Part I; but Wafer does not remain in Jack County. He goes off to war in France. It *is* very much like what is sometimes called the novel of incident, since action predominates finally over other considerations, especially as each section reaches climax. Yet the narrative dwells above all on *process*, at the expense even of action—processes such as hunting a pig or a raccoon, or using a rotary drilling rig—rather too much for strictly even that category.

Like a short story might, *Asleep* finds its unity in process—we shall see that its primary concern is in fact *a* process of exploitation—and yet it spans so much time, and focuses on so specific a place and time and group of people, and does so very much as novels are expected. It shares with such early novels as the *Lazarillo*, or Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, the narrative relation of events spanning a considerable portion of a single person's life—in this case, Wafer Roberts—and even a certain odor of the picaresque. It shares also with the novel a concern with

verisimilitude in the representation of the specific lives lived in a specific time and place. And yet it still is not a novel of sensibility—of heightened emotional response—such as the Bronte sisters produced; most of the characters in it are terribly reticent about their feelings, as is consistent with famously laconic rural origins.

The definition provided by Holman and Harmon for something with at least the name in common with Porter's idea of a short novel describes a work of "intermediate length between the short story and the novel, roughly between 15,000 and 50,000 words," echoing the definition of novelette above, while providing greater precision. Holman and Harmon go on:

> Where the short story is usually content to reveal a character through an action, to be what Joyce called an epiphany, the short novel is concerned with character development. Where the novel in its concern with character development employs a broad canvas, a number of characters, and frequently a broad time span, the short novel concentrates on a limited cast of characters, a relatively short time span, and a single chain of events. Thus, it is an artistic attempt to combine the compression of the short story with the development of the novel. (442)

Of all the writers on the subject, John Gardner most effectively summarizes the terrain that *Asleep in the Arms of God* has come to occupy, except for the matter of length. Were it not for the issue of length, I would adopt his use of the term *novella*, in spite of Porter's unfortunate and somewhat mistaken diatribe. A more-or-less contemporary definition, by a widely acknowledged authority, would be a good thing to have in hand. It would provide both a workable definition, and a term readily recognized by specialist and non-specialist alike. The matter of length is unavoidable, however, with *Asleep* coming in, as noted, a good short story

length and more beyond the limit of the novella. Gardner's take on it goes like this:

> The novella can be defined only as a work shorter than a novel (most novellas run somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 words) and both longer and more episodic than a short story. I use the word "episodic" loosely here, meaning only that the novella usually has a series of climaxes, each more intense than the last, though it may be built—and perhaps in fact ought to be built—of one continuous action. (*Art* 179)

In the end it *must* be a novel, because it is long enough, and because it attempts a "sustained narrative interest" (Holman & Harmon 323), and also because it isn't really anything else. As novels go, this *is* a short one; thus Porter's term, short novel, is probably the best fit, especially because she does not lay down a rigid rule of length. *This* short novel, in its hybrid characteristics, is so novella-like that it really needs the wiggle room she provides. Which is, of course, a perfectly good reason for providing it.

I have already mentioned in the introduction that it ought to be called a novel not of sensibility—heightened emotion—but *in*sensibility—emotion that is actively rejected. More than anything, *Asleep* describes the refusal of Wafer and those around him to come to grips with their interior lives[3]. It is therefore opposite of novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, sort of an anti-Romantic novel. The emotional solitude of the characters in *Asleep* is, in my view, the most obvious individual consequence of the exploitative thinking and behavior the novel explores. Certainly, *unfeelingness*, the inability to fully access or express one's own inner life, and the corollary inability to comprehend the emotional lives and needs of others, however close they may be, can potentially have dire-enough consequences all its own. Thus cut off from self-

knowledge, alienation follows naturally. Alienation is a primary characteristic associated with twentieth century experience, and we see it here early, and in extreme form[4].

Asleep in the Arms of God is a novel about people whose emotional responses, far from heightened, are actually muted. There is thus the aesthetic focus on the processes of the exterior world. Short story-like, the novel will find unity in this "effect," and also in "tone, mood, and style," in a word, in *process*, while tending also to reveal character through action, or—more importantly here—the *in*action of a refusal to examine the interior self. Thus also the virtual absence of interior monologue. When such monologue occurs, it is always an attempt by Wafer to break through the silence his place and time have so closely schooled into him, often in terms approximating dream or vision—a tendency his culture actively discourages. This is not only in keeping with rural origins among the very taciturn country people of turn-of-the-century Texas, in the "novel of the soil" aspect, as already pointed out, but also in terms of the novel's intent. Aesthetics and theme conflate, in the subtly concerted assault on the integrity of just the sort of sensitive soul we will hear more about later, in discussing the typical anti-intellectualism of Anglo[5] Texas life.

The nearest literary relatives of *Asleep* are probably the novels written during or shortly after the period it depicts. These are the realistic, romantic, and psychologically complex novels of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald[6]. My intentions, however, are less psychological than cultural, in examining specific social and ecological effects of exploitation, in the context of what was then the new, and is now the waning century. In certain important respects—the loss of old verities, the disruptions created by shifts in economies, the stalemate of military technologies of offense and defense—the last *fin de siecle* mirrors our own[7].

The genre of the short novel remains problematic to the discussion. The writer of such a work, says Vladimir Nabokov, diminishes "large things" while "enlarging small ones" (Springer 5), but that depends rather too much on how you define your subject, and what large or small thing is at issue. Novella, novelette, or short novel, all are hybrids of short story and novel, and *Asleep in the Arms of God* is definitely that. They combine more-or-less uneasily, here and elsewhere, such that the particulars—nomenclature, qualities, and length, what have you—are endlessly debated. It is, however, a brevity that aspires to detail. A novel, if you will, that attempts to use poetic allusiveness and compression to achieve a near-novelistic elaboration. It is something like the "baby novel" of Gardner, in its shift from point to point along the arc of its plot line. More than Gardner intended, however, the use of "true episodes" recalls the full-scale treatment we expect in a novel. More than the "fictional pointillism" he proposes, *Asleep* does nevertheless release its "story in snippets," attempting to "gradually" amass "the elements, literal and symbolic, of a quasi-energetic action" (*Art* 182).

In its aesthetics, *Asleep in the Arms of God* is an attempt to remove that "quasi" as a descriptor of narrative fictions of approximately middling length. It is a short novel, of about 75,000 words, which attempts to exploit a tension between the goals of the "classic" short story and the "classic" novel[8]. It attempts to reproduce, with modernist psychological verisimilitude, a kind of common *spiritual malfunction* at work in the heart and soul of twentieth century Texans, and by extension, the heart and soul of other Americans elsewhere. Elements of the short story constellate with the focus on *process*; process serves as the means of expressing the unexpressed emotion of the characters, as they work at almost *anything* to prevent the display of emotion. Hopefully, the language of the result will recall the poetic *compression* of emotion, as words and

feeling together are subject to pressure. Novella-like, the novel proceeds in its four parts through a series of climaxes, just as Gardner describes. I might even call it a "baby," as Gardner does, rather than a short novel. But that is rather too informal.

The exploitation of Wafer as a child leads us into Wafer's own exploitation of Beulah, of which he is never fully cognizant. The exploitation by political authority of Wafer as a soldier leads us, in a tour through the horrors of industrialized warfare, finally into the climactic ecological catastrophe in the Keechi, something like the 1947 refinery disaster at Texas City (Vol. 6 *New* 301-302), and many, many other oil-field fires that have occurred in the state. Each climax intensifies the next. Novel-like elements include the aspect of chronicle, the quarter-century time span, and the unifying thread of racial issues (of which more shortly) woven throughout the subordinant themes. The short novel will be episodic in structure, consisting of four sections, titled by the year in which they begin, each independently structured, yet dependent on the cumulative effect leading into them, and through them, into the transformation of character experienced at least by Wafer and possibly also by his step-father, Waylon. It will somewhat violate Gardner's requirement of "one continuous action," unless we regard the family drama of the first part—a result of that all-important "spiritual malfunction," much as war, racial prejudice, and industrial pollution—as anchoring across the second and third into the fourth, where it is finally resolved, so far as it can be.

The Texas Literary Tradition

Texas does not have the appearance of fertile literary ground. The establishment of a Texas Literary Tradition, beginning with Walter Prescott Webb, J. Frank Dobie, and Roy Bedichek[9], in the 1930s (*Texas* 4), can be regarded very reasonably as an unlikely turn of

events[10]. The reasons why it was unlikely are complex, as, too, are the reasons why it happened anyway. To begin, Don Graham quotes Stanley Walker:

> As an eager but perpetually frustrated youth, I looked upon Texas as place essentially coarse and brutal. Its humor was either silly or offensive. Its so-called heroic figures were mostly fakers. Its politicians were ridiculous, either ignoramuses, zealots, demagogues, or plain asses. Few persons ever read a book, and when they did it was a fourth-rate book . . . The free souls, the sensitive men and women, the scholars, the dreamers, the independent thinkers were regarded with suspicion, as cranks and menaces. (*Texas* 21)

How could a Texas Literary Tradition begin at all, in the midst of such menacing anti-intellectualism? Once begun, how could it prosper? Doubt and uncertainty, driven by specific, even catastrophic ruptures in the life of the people, formed a savage undertow in early Anglo Texas life, and in modern times this has ballooned into that *spiritual malfunction* I keep on harping about, a pervasive ethical malady. Within the state, this malady is pervasively ignored. Sometimes—at sporting events, and especially in high school football—it is even actively encouraged. It consists of an inherited harshness, a genetic paranoia, born in the antebellum years of the nineteenth century, of a people beleaguered from all sides. It is intolerant, narrow, "coarse and brutal," and viciously exploitative. Yet a liberal, more-or-less egalitarian impulse to charity exists with it, cheek-by-jowl, proceeding, in fact, from precisely the same sources. In a word, the circumstances of Texas history and culture, and the literary tradition it has spawned somewhat unwillingly, carry us immediately and squarely into the theme of *Asleep in the Arms of God*. The exploitative mentality has resulted in a number of other, more modern ruptures in the

life of the state, ruptures that conflate to produce the ennui and fragmentation of its postmodern condition, a kind of shared schizophrenia. Yet these things are far from new. Their seeds were sown long ago.

Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's book, *Contingencies of Value*, succinctly expresses its thrust in its title—value is contingent, that is, *conditional*. No value or taste or opinion or belief are, in Herrnstein-Smith's view, "free of external influence" (9), but subject rather to a prevalent "politics of taste" (25), where inclusion not only assesses, but promotes and creates value (10). Value occurs within the circumstance in which a work, an action, or opinion or belief are "properly" perceived (14). "With respect to value," says Herrnstein-Smith, "everything is always in motion with respect to everything else." Value will be found, in our time, not "in objectivity or invariance, " as in the modernist past, "but *in those motions*—" (15). Value, in other words, is arbitrary and conventional, a property of "the dynamics of a system" (30), and objectivity in anything flatly impossible. The effect is to decenter what were formerly privileged views of the world, and the modes of literary discourse that describe them—the magisterial pronouncement, and the ascendancy of Western (as in Western Civilization) or, in American and Texan terms, of Anglo models. The postmodern condition is a state of radical moral and cultural relativity, where all ethical structures are also constructs[11]. The old verities are *veritas* no longer

The terms of the question, post Bedichek *et al*., seem to have largely been determined in Texas by Larry McMurtry, on the strength of a single, well-known essay, "Ever a Bridegroom: Reflections on the Failure of Texas Literature." McMurtry complains principally about the lack of Texas urban fiction (McMurtry 8)—a dearth the section of *The Texas Literary Tradition* titled "Slouching Towards Houston" (180-194) shows to be somewhat illusory in the first place[12].

McMurtry's own subsequent self-defection from his urban manifesto[13] points up an overarching truth respecting any specifically "Texas" approach to literature: the past is very much present, and it cannot legitimately be ignored. The Texas tradition, in contrast to the modernist "strong and conscious break with tradition" (Holman & Harmon 298) represents "a strong and conscious" attempt actually to *establish* itself—a type of challenge not presented to traditions established already, such as those Eliot, Pound, and their colleagues—including Katherine Anne Porter—so sharply rejected.

It was therefore in the nature of the Texas tradition to be conservative, in that it sought to preserve what was in process of being established; yet it was precisely contemporary with, and deeply influenced by an ongoing rejection and/or radical modification of traditional Western models of literature and life. This somewhat schizoid circumstance attending the tradition's birth is perpetuated today, as we shall see, and was embodied in 1939 in the preference of the Texas Institute of Letters for J. Frank Dobie over Katherine Anne Porter (*Texas* 58). Porter, of course, is the modern who is without doubt the finest writer the state has so far produced. With all we have discussed of Texas' hostility toward the learned, the rejection is not especially surprising; in Texas, any institutionally recognized intellectual activity was going to have to fit a pretty precise mold, which Porter did not fit at all—she was a woman, sympathetic to the downtrodden, and hostile to the militaristic. A close reading of especially Webb will reveal strong conservative tendencies, including racism and militarism. An equally strong strain of Calvinistic misogyny, long present in the state and the nation, is also there and elsewhere indicated[14]. It is certain that in rejecting Porter, the state had rejected one of those "sensitive men and women" Walker was talking about.

Robert F. Gish refers to the pre-political correctness canon of American literature as a "hopeless balkanization," because the anthologized canon bypassed "oral and folk literature, any and all black writers" and the "entire southwestern United States as well as Native American and immigrant writers of any kind" (39), an exclusion symptomatic of Herrnstein-Smith's "politics of taste." As shocking as it is to what was the usual popular perception, the coupling of literary Texas to marginalized peoples is not at all out of place, and the marginalization appears nowhere in higher relief than in the east Texas writers, such as Porter, who are also culturally southerners. Also, following John Graves once again, it is precisely the "oral and folk" sources that make up the bulk of J. Frank Dobie's work[15] (*Texas* 21). Among the marginalized peoples of Texas, exclusive of the minorities also marginalized elsewhere, are none others than the "Anglo," or "Anglo-Hibernian," or "Scotch-Irish" settlers John Graves talks about in *Goodbye to a River*, and Stephen L. Hardin in *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution*—the same people from whom many Caucasian Americans are descended. This duality, of on the one hand a putative racial superiority, and on the other a manifest economic inferiority, is one of many signs of the cultural schizophrenia at work in the state.

These people—*trailer trash* is another name often applied to them—experience an economic and cultural marginalization not much different functionally from that along racial or cultural lines. John Graves describes very ably the thinking that leads to this not-quite-self-marginalization, as "chauvinistic fatuity, Bible-Belt dogmatism" and an "extrovert contempt for gentle intangibles." The "money-mindedness" he also cites (*Texas* 17) is likewise certainly very ironic, since by and large, these people do not have any money to speak of. Such is the "standardly Texan obtuse thinking" (*Texas* 19), which so often boils down, for those "sensitive

men and women," to an abiding shame in one's origins, such as Wafer may be thought on occasion to feel, though he never, never expresses it. Wafer's heirs are these same postmodern rednecks, habitues of the ubiquitous doublewide, beleaguered still, and just as insecure as ever. Heirs, too, of the very same tenants and sharecroppers exploited by Waylon Roberts, as he morphs from farmer to gentleman farmer. He becomes in the process the oppressor of his own people.

Many of the "immigrant writers" that Gish refers to, in any case, have found a voice in the work of such *Tejano* writers as Sandra Cisneros and Genaro Gonzalez, just as the Westerns of Alan LeMay have been turned on their head in the work of writers like R.G. Vliet. As Herrnstein-Smith predicts, the privileged modes of literary discourse have been decentered, and the ascendancy of Western (as in Western Civilization) or, in Texan terms, of Anglo models, no longer proceeds unchallenged. In the postmodern condition, those and other "values" are just the things "always in motion with respect to everything else," and these in turn give rise, in the hearts of fundamentalist Anglo Texans, to still greater unease.

Historical and Philosophical Base

We do not divide ourselves up quite so much as we did before; at least, not along the lines of race or wealth. We do it now along the lines of our capabilities, and these prove to be often more negative than Keats could have dreamed. The treatment of the world and everything in it as an economically exploitable, movable resource is, in our culture, not merely permissible, but actually indispensable. Those with a moral shortsightedness sufficient to the purpose of performing unhesitantly just such exploitations can and do rise and rule in our society, while the mass of us remain just as we are, just as we have long been: one other resource to exploit. The

exploitative rage of not just the West, but the whole race of humans, bores on, down its bloody path through history, largely unnoticed and certainly unhindered. It is arguable that history itself is not much more than the recital of incident along the path of that wreckage. And that is just how insidious it is: we are so accustomed to the presence of the debris, we don't even recognize it as such; yet that is what it is.

We refer to such behaviors as war and slavery, capitalism and communism (along with their respective versions of imperialism), sharecropping and the oil business, as exploitative behaviors. The beliefs and assumptions that make permissible such exploitative behaviors amount to a sort of polar opposite of what Martin Heidegger named *Sorge*, or Care (Langan 21)[16], of and for the planet, and all its children. "Man's relationship to the tools he uses and to the people he knows involves something more consequential than mere spatial relationship, namely relationship of intention, of concern, of meaning" which become "the discovery of self that is called Care"[17] (Langan 27). *Sorge* was conceived as a benign use of the world, presumably precluding both war and unrestrained industrial technology.

Heidegger refers with his Fall to a fall from authentic living (Grene 49), where the inauthentic lies chiefly in the blind acceptance of authoritative pronouncement. The West and the modern world entire, in this view, are *radically* Fallen. They are Fallen due to an insistence, in order to render it *usable*, on savaging the world of nature. The discourse of that process is science, the "authoritative pronouncement" of the West, which Heidegger rejects, along with the Aristotelian thought that gave rise to it. In this rejection of "the tightly ordered neatness of an Aristotelian universe" (Grene 44), he speaks of two different kinds of thinking. "Calculation is the mark of all thinking that plans and investigates . . . ever more promising and . . . more

economical possibilities." *Meditative* thinking, on the other hand, is "thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is," the kind of thinking which "bide[s] its time, to await . . . whether the seed will come up" (Heidegger *Discourse* 46).

The predominance of the Calculative is embodied in the different extremes of exploitative behavior depicted in the novel. The rejection of self-examination, and the fatal lack of self-knowledge that results, lead or contribute to such behavior. Yet the Meditative continuously attempts to break through, as in Wafer's tendency periodically to tumble into the waking dream of a vision—a tendency that steadily lessens in him, until as an adult, it is almost altogether dormant. In Vereen Bell's formulation, echoing Heidegger, Wafer would have to surrender the Calculative. He would have to surrender "Cartesian predispositions," leading from Aristotle[18], quite reasonably cultivated in his post-war life as a road and street engineer in Fort Worth, and before that in his life as a soldier, and before that simply in the world as he found it, and as it found him. He would have to somehow recover a "primal state of consciousness," such as came to him so easily as a child, before his consciousness became "identified with thinking only"[19] (31). He would have to rediscover somehow the *inner* life the dysfunctions of his family and culture have attempted to deny him. By novel's end, he has not yet managed to do it. But he shows signs of at least beginning to know that he *should* do it.

His failure is the failure of the West, the failure of the Calculative to account for even the *most* vital threads in the warp and woof of human experience. What I want to do in *Asleep*, as I have said already, is examine specific effects of those exploitative or Calculative behaviors, because they actually *create* that failure. I want to do this in the context and circumstances I know best, and in the context of a new century that in certain important aspects mirrors our own

time. I am not persuaded, as many seem to be, that we are so much wiser than our forebears, that the early years of the twenty-first century will not bring the same kind of bloodletting that began both the nineteenth and twentieth. We are not, as we imagine ourselves to be, proof against such lunacies as Austerlitz and Borodino—or worse yet, Passchendale and the Somme—or worse yet, Hiroshima and Auschwitz. What will the new century bring, to make even the horror of the death camps appear benign? *No one*, at novel's end, thinks Meditatively. Avoidance and even full awareness of such enormous evils *requires* Meditative thinking. But everyone is too busy calculating, even Wafer. At novel's end, he returns at least to the *disposition* to heed his inner voice. But he and we are still not proof, because we still think in ways too much like our forebears, a thoughtless, reflexive parroting of usage past that causes Wafer to suffer; and we suffer with him.

Texas will seem to some an unlikely venue for enacting such a large and important theme. I disagree most emphatically, as I think would anyone with a more than casual knowledge of the region and its history. Much that follows here will be for the purpose of dispelling that odd and persistent prejudice, though it will also show it to have some truth. Both assertions rest on the reality in Texas of widespread intolerance, which is only yet another word for describing exploitation. The exclusivity of the exploitative, its insistence on its own self-justification, its wholesale rejection of alternate viewpoints, in other words, was nowhere acted out more graphically than in Texas. The examples are legion, just within the limits of racism alone. But it is racism that provides the clearest example.

Racism and Other Exploitations

Racism was imported from the United States with the American colonists, who arrived in

numbers after 1821 (Hardin 5). The Texas Revolution was begun within the Mexican Republic, but in the internal revolutionary struggle, the extreme racist factions of Anglo Texas—the independence party—triumphed early (Vol. 6 *New* 399-400). The period between the beginning of the Revolution in 1835, and the final victory of American arms over Mexico in 1848, can be regarded as one protracted racial war, between Anglo-Americans in Texas and their darker-complected neighbors, Hispanic or Native American. Independent Texas joined the Union as a slave state, just in time to participate in the fratricidal struggles of 1861-1865, another clash in which matters of race were of central importance. Southern in culture and outlook, the post-Reconstruction state entered the twentieth century a solid participant in the Jim Crow South (Vol. 5 *New* 965).

Until the victory of Colonel Ranald Mackenzie at Palo Duro Canyon in the late 1870s (*New* Vol. 4 416), the state of Texas prosecuted its own race war against the Comanche and other Native American tribes, quite aside from the wars fought all across the plains by the U.S. Army[20]. Anglo Texas had done so from the very beginning of colonization, before Republic or state existed (Newcomb 340-341). The Anglo Texans gave Texas Indians the choice to "go elsewhere or be exterminated" (Curtis qtd. in Newcomb 333), and the war became ultimately a war of exile and extermination. Virtually all, save the Alabama-Coushatta, were driven beyond the borders of the state (Vol. 1 *New* 77-80), but its end did not portend the end of racism in Texas life. The race riots at Fort Worth in 1913, Houston and Longview during World War One, Sherman in 1930, Beaumont in 1943, and at TSU in Houston in 1967 (Vol. 5 *New* 590-591), as well as the numerous lynchings in Klan-center Waco between 1900 and 1930 (Vol. 6 *New* 777), are all eloquent of the vicious strain of racial prejudice so widespread, then and now, in the life

of the state. The much more recent lynching in Jasper makes this clearer still. Racism—the economic domination of one people by another—is among the clearest and most virulent signs of the exploitative mentality as it exists anywhere.

But racism is still only one aspect. There are others, beginning with the abuses of cotton-based agriculture, which were not confined alone to its need for the cheap labor of slavery, and later, of sharecropping, the post-war cousin of slavery. Cotton eventually exhausts the land upon which it is cultivated, and wide stretches of prime agricultural land all over Texas were thus exhausted in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Graves *Hard* 21-23). The proliferation of cedar brakes, as a result of increased erosion, incident to the destruction of turf by agriculture and animal husbandry, is also a symptom of such exhaustion (Graves *Goodbye* 21-23). Likewise the spread northward of mesquite trees, begun during the cattle drives of the 1870s. The seeds were carried in the dung of the South Texas Longhorns, who had long before developed a taste for the mesquite beans native to the south of the state. Overgrazing of these and other cattle subsequently accelerated the erosion where it had already begun, and started it where it had not begun (*New* Vol. 4 641). The zone of depletion spread, compromising more marginal prairie ranchlands, while the cedar and the mesquite continued to colonize the gullies and hillsides, and the worn-out, eroded prairies and fields. Where cedar and mesquite grow, less grass or none can prosper, and so the soil washes downward, into the creeks and rivers, and ultimately into the sea[21] (Graves *Goodbye* 26-27).

Nor does the tale end there. The twentieth century has brought with it a new kind of ecological killing field, beginning in 1901 at Spindletop, on the coastal plains between Beaumont and Port Arthur. The abuses of the oil industry in the first half of the twentieth century laid waste

wide swaths of the Texas countryside, with practices so destructive the industry itself was ultimately obliged to curtail them[22]. They wasted too much oil (Williamson et al. 319). More than oil was wasted, however. The scenario played out recently in Alaska's Prince William Sound was enacted again and again in the Texas of the 1920s and 30s, at Sour Lake and Saratoga on the coast (Williamson et al. 79), and at Ranger and Desdemona in North Texas (Greene 173), not far at all from the Keechi Valley of Jack County. It is impossible to document the full extent of the ecological impact of a flush oil field, in the years before gassers and gushers were routinely controlled. It could not have been less than that at Prince William Sound, so much larger was the field on which it was enacted. At Desdemona, at one point in the boom there, the oil was said to have flowed across the road to De Leon at fully three feet deep (Greene 175).

The exploitative mentality that has led the West to its current pass was the point of the sword that Anglo Texas drove into the breasts of its enemies. This is most obvious in the technological supremacy of the Colt revolver over Mexican and Native American arms (Webb 84-86), but it is manifest elsewhere in the story of the conquest and settlement of Texas. Modern Texas, heir of that conquest, depends, for its uninterrupted prosperity, upon an economic and social structure geared to continuous exploitation of natural resources, including a working underclass, though that underclass is no longer ethnically defined. Texas remains today, in many respects, as blatant in its exploitative practices and attitudes as it ever was, and totally unapologetic. It is not for nothing that the state is renowned for such niceties as the uncontrolled sale of firearms (Ruthart 8)[23]. And leaving aside the justice of capital punishment, the well-known frequency of executions in Texas is carried out with what sometimes appears to be an exuberant delight on the part of a sizable fraction of the population.

The post-Colonial, post-Imperial and in a word, postmodern world of the present is characterized by the economic and political triumph of the West, coupled ironically with ethical and cultural decay, and a terrible moral ennui, together a sort of arrested ethical development. The blind eye that Texas turns to moral issues, unless they are of the safely non-controversial traditional type, is surely symptomatic of something more significant than mere rank reaction. Texas in fact retains a mind-set near Imperial in its autocracy. Manifest destiny is still manifest, in Texas. Elsewhere, exploitative thinking and practice have led to the precipice, from whence we now contemplates the Abyss, Heidegger's *das Nichts* (Heidegger *Basic* 10), or Nothingness—war, terrorism, ecological and natural catastrophe. The understanding of that mentality is therefore central to any genuine understanding of where we are, and how we got there. The traditional values Texas holds onto so fiercely, far from sustaining her, have become in a backward yearning just one more tool of exploitation. Institutions that ought to encourage gentler handling are marshaled to the defense of the harshness exploitative economies demand. Because Texas is, after all, not merely inhospitable to the intellectual and literary; it is often actively hostile. The nightmares of postmodern Texas are the same as they have always been: extinction, and the loss of identity to darker-complected neighbors.

Politics, Fundamentalism, and Postmodernism in Texas

In the earliest days of the twentieth century, before the First World War, Texas was among the regions most active in a political movement known as Populism, "representing the discontented farmers of the northwest and the south" (Hicks 241). The rise of this late nineteenth-century third party to national prominence came about as a result of a political alliance of "small farmers, sheep ranchers, and laborers . . . almost entirely Protestant and

native-born white" ("Populist" 393). The Populist—or properly, the People's Party—was actuated by grievances "against railroads, monopolies, bankers, and political bossism" (Hofstadter 6). The Populist party faltered because "in the south most of the farmers refused to endanger white supremacy by voting against the Democratic party"[24] (Hicks 241). Norman D. Brown says of Grimes county that "an estimated thirty percent of the whites and more than eighty percent of the black voters . . . voted Populist until the party was crushed by the Democratic White Man's Union in 1900" (*Texas* 41). In other words, the traits that lead in Texas to so liberal-leaning an ideology as Populism in the first place, are also somehow the *same* traits that led to the demise of the People's Party—J.R. Sweet's party—on explicitly racist grounds. That these contradictory impulses proceeded from the same group—poor Protestant Texas Anglos—is certainly schizoid, and certainly a "moral malfunction."

The point is in the *conflictedness* of Texans, of both nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On the one hand, there is the sense of common, everyday, working people, pitted against the powerful and the wealthy; and on the other, a disinclination on the part of those same common, everyday, working people to give place to anyone perceived as still lower down than they on a putative socioeconomic scale. Valuation of persons, remembering Herrnstein-Smith, is not less contingent than other matters[25]. Anglo Texans were once the very backbone of Populism, and then of Progressivism; finally, they were the rabidly Democratic supporters of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The present, on the other hand, has seen the wholesale defection of these same voters to the conservative Republican cause—and this *does not* represent any real change in the attitudes of those voters. The sense of being threatened by exterior forces—forces of diversity, the current multiculturalism in education and in other areas of postmodern life, forces

of alien cultures, the *Tejano* culture of Texas Hispanics, which ironically predates the Anglo by a century—is a Texas trait that carries across all boundaries, rural and urban, nineteenth and twentieth century, southern and western, Anglo and *Tejano*. The result is as Tom Pilkington notes: "Texas was settled by people attracted by the openness and freedom of the land, yet in the twentieth century the area has been dominated by a rigidly conformist society that has taken a fearful toll of psychological and emotional suffering from those who declined to conform" (*Texas* 100).

Never especially modest, Waylon Roberts' love of conformity grows with his wealth. It grows with his acquisition of fertile lands; then of a store with which to bind his peasant-sharecroppers to the land they keep for him, in a manner that is blatantly medieval in its results; then with his good fortune in possessing land overlaying deposits of oil, his participation in the exploitation of *that* resource the final betrayal of his own rural origins. Yet it is not, ironically, and again somewhat schizophrenically, behavior out-of-keeping with a status the twin of that pastoral origin: his literal and symbolic status as the heir first of the *dis*posessors of the native cultures of the region, and then as the heir of slaveholders, in the first and literal instance regarding Negro slavery, and in the second regarding the debt-driven wage slavery of white and black sharecroppers alike[26]. Aspects of fundamentalist Christianity, figured in the novel chiefly by Brother Earl, fuel a disjunction between values declaimed and values enacted, in that Biblical authority was often cited in justifying such exploitations. Like other ironies, these are at the point of collision between the better angels of our natures, and the worst. The contrast between Katherine Anne Porter's personal need to lie about her origins[27], for example, and the pathos she shows in such stories as "Flowering Judas," indirectly points up the same contrast. Here, a

revolutionist—Braggioni—is portrayed with a multilayered modernist irony foreshadowing postmodern concerns with ideas containing within themselves the seeds of dissolution, as did the slave south, as can be said also of fundamentalist Christianity, and also of the Jim Crow south of the 1920s:

> The gluttonous bulk of Braggioni has become a symbol of her many disillusions, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues . . . But she cannot help feeling that she has been betrayed irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be, and at times she is almost contented to rest in this sense of grievance as a private store of consolation. (91-92).

Struggle though he finally does for his humanity—and who does not?—Waylon Roberts is the Braggioni of *Asleep*. In his betrayal of his rural fellows, and his co-opting by the forces of exploitation, the worse angels of his nature have won. Those of brother Earl's nature won long before we ever met him, despite his sanctified veneer.

What is so compelling is the disjunction between what is desired, and what is actually achieved. Between those better angels, and the real and present demons. This same sort of thing goes on in William Humphrey's 1989 novel *No Resting Place*, the story of the Cherokee dispossession, a story reaching its climax in 1839 Texas, at the Battle of Neches Creek, where the Texas Cherokee Nation and its allies were expelled from the state. This is from Humphrey's Reverend Malcolm Mackenzie, who accompanies the Eastern branch of Cherokee on the Trail of Tears, from Georgia and Alabama to Oklahoma, the Nations:

> It was not that what he had seen and experienced had made him lose his belief in God's existence. His heresy went deeper than that. Gone from him forever was his faith in God's goodness. He would survive . . . and would spend the rest of his life ministering to his adopted people in the Territory, blessing them in God's name into and out of this world, revealing only in one of the last of his letters . . . that the words of his which his flock wanted to hear, and which he mounted the pulpit, like a scaffold, every Sabbath to tell them, were words in which he himself had long ago lost all belief. (214)

Texas is sometimes referred to as the buckle of the Bible belt. Certainly, fundamentalist Christianity—and its characteristic offer of simplistic solutions to complex problems—is alive and well today in Texas. The prototype of Christianity in Texas was Catholicism, the very earliest efforts at European colonization carried out under the aegis of the Church. It remained the dominant—indeed, the only church—for many decades after the first Spanish colonization.

Calvinistic, Protestant Christianity entered Texas in the same manner as racism, with the earliest of the Anglo settlers; shortly after immigration commenced, the overwhelming majority of Texans were Anglo, and also non-Catholic. This fact embodied a convenient hypocrisy: in order to immigrate to Texas, the Mexican government required conversion to Catholicism, the official religion of the Mexican state (Vol. 1 *New* 1027). Famously lax priests, such as Father Michael Muldoon, administering various sacraments "on an assembly-line basis," made possible the immigration of thousands of Anglos, by enabling them to remain illegally Protestant while publicly professing—at least so far as the paperwork—the required Catholicism (Vol. 5 *New* 523). Religious hypocrisy has no longer residency in Texas than elsewhere, but I think rarely has

it been practiced so smilingly, or with such a legalistic veneer.

From Porter into Humphrey, what we get is the intimation that such easy dissimulation comes finally at a price, however harmless it may initially appear. Underneath the very large, very shiny buckle of Protestant Texas, there lurked from the first a bad case of moral indigestion, an added weight to the freight of hypocrisy that Texas must share with the rest of America, and especially with the rest of the South. By "moral indigestion," I mean something very like Rick Wallach's comment on the Indian wars described in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*: "It is doubtful whether any society, having chosen to pretend to a Christian ethos, could sustain the crushing burden of guilt such behavior must entail without inscribing delusional histories to censor and repress its racist dream. Like all repression, ours is permeable, and some of our nightmares always break through" (135). Our nightmare is extinction, be it through absorption or plain death; and break through it does. It broke through recently, and violently, in Jasper[28].

It is finally a case of deeply held values canceling out—*deconstructing* one another—with an intensifying fierceness. The "private store of consolation" becomes then emblematic of postmodern-style cultural and social atomization, which continues to accelerate. What is missing, and what makes the postmodern dilemma all the more poignant, is something with which to replace our vanished and vaunted certainties. The yearning for it is precisely Miriam Marty Clark's "lingering commitment to a transcendental subject" (147), a yearning which makes of the postmodern the clear executor and heir of modernism. In the dissection of this, we have encountered the fundamental schizophrenia of the Texas outlook. It is that which unites the rest. Put it another way: the moral burden of slavery is the explicit correlative of the Texas war with Mexico and with the various populations of Native Americans found initially within its borders,

crusades which formed the "transcendental subject" of our ancestors, in spite of a loudly proclaimed Christianity. In our determination to carve out our own niche, we have displaced many others, and ignored our own professed values to do it.

In the aesthetic terms of this short novel, everything gets bound up in "the radical troubling of realist claims." These are the postmodern claims of Herrnstein-Smith; claims that go beyond the "modernist inheritance," and "surrender in small ways . . . the expectation of epiphany, the hope for metaphysical consolation in a fragmenting world" (Clark 147), the lost consolation of religion effectively surrendered first to expediency, and later to sheer love of conquest, and the power and violence it creates. In Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady Cole's father at one point says of Texas Anglos, "We're like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We dont know what's goin to show up here come daylight. We dont even know what color they'll be" (26). The indeterminant future of the postwar 1940s is spoken of in that novel in something like the terms Vladimir Nabokov uses in discussing *Lolita*, the novelist as a conjurer, "explaining one trick by performing another" (282). Our indeterminant present, and the future in its travail, are only the reasonable, logical results of indeterminancies past, and the certanties that were never really so certain as Christian belief was pleased to proclaim.

Conclusion

The postmodern awareness of the transience of human things[29] does not demand of us the passivity of moral eunuchs. It is truly and precisely the confrontation with death—the ultimate transience—that makes so important our halting attempts to puzzle out right from wrong. Fiction then becomes, for us, as indispensable as the drama, the *sacramental* drama, of classical antiquity. Think of it as *sacramental* fiction, a story that is almost (or even actually) a prayer,

just as John Gardner suggests in his *On Moral Fiction* (28). The irreligiousity of the postmodern actually feeds into this, because it is arguable that if God *is* dead—as Frederich Nietszche asserts, and at that, at about the time that Wafer Roberts was born—then he and you and I had best get cracking on saving the species, because there isn't anyone to do it for us any more. That is an undertaking that I, for one, find compellingly moral. And I do not require a deity to tell me this is so.

A logical development of Gardner's argument—that all writers of fiction must, at least implicitly, assert some notion of what is or is not right (5)—would have to involve, in a postmodern environment, an aesthetic of uncertainty, much like that proposed by Arthur Saltzman (89). In some respects, this is little more than a reformulation of Keats' negative capability; but how more intense our "uncertanties, Mysteries, doubts" (Holman & Harmon 314) than his, in an age which takes *just that*, for its chiefest trait? Such an aesthetic has become about the only alternative we have, absent sudden and unexpected divine intervention, to simply giving up. The hollowness that Gardner hears, and we hear with him, when he raps on Art's pregnant brass belly is only, after all, the bonging ethical void of the age itself. *Uncertainty* has become a very important word, sadly descriptive of our time. We must, like Keats, be able to live in the throes of it—because it *will not* go away.

Consciously and unconsciously, meaning and emotion connect, and they correlate in the heart. The *resonance* of these together, gives rise in turn to an artistic *texture*. That texture is essentially the specific place and time we chose, to set our scene and tell our story. To achieve such a texture, however, there must be a base upon which to apply it. Yet everything is in motion; we cannot stop the whirl of shifting value; so we make virtue of necessity, in classic

human fashion, and we use the very fact of the indeterminant to find *in that itself* the still, unmoving center of the whirling disk, much as Herrnstein-Smith suggests. So that finally we get, when we have done with laying the texture on, a rich surface, overlying a mass which gives us back, when we thump it, a meaty resonance, redolent of flesh and viscera, fluid and gas, saints and sinners, reconstructed and deconstructed saints, demons, poets, fishmongers. Our lack of certainty must serve us now as faith once served the Age of Faith. The substance under the surface is some sense cognizant, therefore, of the centermost ethical dilemma the writer can find in his subject. For our subject—I assert, for our *time*—it is the same that Neitzsche pointed out long ago: the loss of belief in a supernatural enforcer of ethical behavior. We have lost faith with faith; now we have faith in uncertainty.

Postmodernism asserts the imprecision of language. It asserts likewise the imprecision of values and morality, where Gardner argues that art actually holds decay at bay (*Moral* 6). The point lies in moreso the concern of both with decay in the first place. I contend that this concern is so absolutely *rational*, that our uncertainty makes the whole search for workable ethics not less important, but more. If whatever ethics we arrive at lack means of enforcement, the mere idea of *enforcing* an ethic—implicitly a philosophy also, as Gardner notes (*Moral* 9-10)—conjures up pretty ugly possibilities, anyway; does it not? Yet Gardner says the world and art are "holy" (*Moral* 156), giving the word its present meaning. He says that Kant defined this holiness of art as "independent of all interest" (*Moral* 158), which I take to mean standing apart from the more limited circumstances of practical, or Calculative demands. This is very interesting, because what "holy" means in the original Hebrew is not "sacred" or its equivalent, but literally, "other." Other, that is, than human. My experience, feeling, belief and intuition is that God, if he exists at

all, is far, far away from human feeling and concern. Of course, we *do* write about metaphor *with* metaphor—Derrida and Foucault, notably missing from Gardner's analysis, are leering over his shoulder anyway—so that metaphor remains, as always, rich in its mystery, mysterious because it is rich. God is remote because he is a metaphor. If he is more than that, we simply have no means of accessing it.

Gardner's idea of "woundedness" as the genesis of the artistic personality (*Moral* 203), is the more profoundly appealing, because it is also correlates with experience, and explicitly at that. Inner wounds, and the whole idea of an inner life, are just as metaphorical as the notion of god. They have no physical existence; they do not exist at all, except as we *think* them. We are angered by the seeming absence of God, just as if he were present, and ethical questions proceed from that anger. Such questions *must* be addressed, with or without comforting ethical decrees from on high. But if no answer can ever be more than a mere attempt at coherency, and a largely provisional attempt at that, it does matter. Yet Gardner is correct in putting such questions as these at center stage, and we are all, in that sense, engaged in Moral Fiction. We must be, if we write any sort of fiction at all. Just so the lack of "real and deep love" that Gardner detects in much of contemporary literature reflects a lack of seriousness (*Moral* 85), as if, lacking God, it had all become a game. This is not so: it is no game, but played in deadly earnest, and these are our lives at stake. Put it this way, metaphorically: I cannot come at any problem from any ground but God's own grave. Even dead, he remains indispensable.

[1] Katherine Anne Porter's admiration of Henry James is reflected in the density of her novel, *Ship of Fools*, which many critics—including James T.F. Tanner—regard as almost unreadable. Some would say the same of Henry James himself.

[2] The importance of the short story series in modern fiction is widely acknowledged; examples of its preeminence include Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, and Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*.

[3] I do not mean to say that Texans of the types described have no interior lives; only that they insist on attempting to behave as if they do not.

[4] *Alienation* is certainly reflected in the work of every Modern discussed.

[5] The term *Anglo*, in Texas, has come to refer to anyone of more-or-less Caucasian appearance. The diversity of persons in this category is reflected to a degree in the very incomplete list of ethnic settlers in footnote # 12.

[6] Most reasonably well-read people are aware of the romanticism that surrounded the First World War while it was fought, and afterward in many novels, notably Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

[7] Nietszche begins the Modernist period with the startling assertion that "God is dead." A similar pronouncement, emanating from the theological academy in the 1960s, led to widespread book-burning and even near-riots all across Texas and the South generally. Modernism came to Texas late; it is deliciously ironic that she should find herself among the most postmodern of regions.

[8] A "classic" short story as represented by Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," or anything from Joyce's *Dubliners*; the *epiphanic* short story; and the "classic" novel as represented by the novels of psychological realism produced by Woolf and Joyce; the *stream-of-consciousness* novel. Here, it is a stream that has been dammed and roofed over.

[9] J. Frank Dobie started working in the 1920s, Walter Prescott Webb in the 1930s. Roy Bedichek published all of his work at a relatively advanced age, beginning in 1950. All three men were of the same generation, the generation of Katherine Anne Porter and Wafer Roberts. Though somewhat later, the folklorist C.L. Sonnichsen should probably also be grouped with these people.

[10] Not only unlikely but unreasonably fortuitous: the tradition was established by a folklorist (Dobie), an historian (Webb), and a naturalist (Bedichek), pretty much covering all the necessary bases.

[11] Texas was riper for such a view than it knew, containing within its borders a wealth of diversity in its history of settlement by Mexican, black and Anglo American, Czech, German, Polish, French, Irish, and many other peoples.

[12] A list of the better-known titles of urban Texas fiction would include James Leo Herlihy's *Midnight Cowboy* and Billy Lee Brammer's *The Gay Place*.

[13] In *Lonesome Dove* and everything thus far thereafter, amounting to six or so books at this writing.

[14] All of this, however, is much less true of Bedichek, who voices, as a naturalist, an agenda embodying many concerns that are standard fare for even extreme environmentalists of our own day. In his seminal *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist*, for instance, Bedichek discusses the tendency of the state's people to a frank and unappealing meanness in their folk nomenclature (196). Additionally, in justice to Dobie, it should be noted that he defended liberal causes throughout his life, including the struggle of American Blacks for Civil Rights in the 1960s, as John Graves points out in his essay on "The Big Three" in *The Texas Literary Tradition* (21-22).

[15] The folklore that Dobie recorded, though predominantly that of Anglo Texans, is also frequently from non-Anglo sources, primarily Hispanic.

[16] This is not remotely a comprehensive reading of Heidegger, or even an especially good one; I make use of certain of his ideas, and that is all.

[17] As I understand it, *Sorge* provides the definitively meaningful, that is, *authentic* style of existence.

[18] Most famously, *cogito ergo sum*. Thinking systematically is less valued here, and introspection valued more. The assumption seems to be that some kinds of knowledge cannot be arrived at cognitively, but only more-or-less intuitively.

[19] That's "identified with *Calculative* thinking only."

[20] The Texas Rangers and Militia, for example, broke the power of the Penateka Comanche (the Honey-Eaters) at

Plum Creek in the 1840s. The Comanches defeated at Palo Duro by Mackenzie were mostly Quahodi Comanche (the Antelope People), the largest grouping left at that late date.

[21] Obviously, this represents a simplification of a complex process. Bedichek and Graves both present acute analyses of this situation.

[22] James Smither Abercrombie, collaborating with Cameron Iron Works of Houston, designed the first successful blowout preventer while working over a problem well in Liberty County's Hull oil field. A patent application was filed on the device on April 14, 1922.

[23] See also articles by Griffin T. Murphey and Bob Norman in the same issue of the *Star-Telegram*.

[24] Far from the bulwark of liberalism it is widely believed to have become, the Democratic party of the Jim Crow south was a tenacious defender of segregation and the economic status quo. Such recent Democratic defectors to the Republican fold as Jesse Helms had been the remnant of this faction, powerful within Democratic ranks even long after the Civil Rights era.

[25] Indeed, a largish faction of Americans seem content to consign anew the latest waves of immigrants—refugees from various countries of the equatorial Third World, and the continuing influx of Hispanics—to marginalized status. On the other hand, the next most recent group, the Vietnamese, appear to have achieved some recent measure of mainstream acceptance, though certainly not without turmoil. Valuation of any group, late or recent, is evidently contingent on prevailing social circumstance; with the war receding into the past, it is much easier to accept the Vietnamese. This is not true of African-Americans, however, or of Hispanic Americans, groups with which American "Anglos" have had a continuously troubled history.

[26] The same people whose union might have made all the difference for the People's Party.

[27] Born Callie Porter, she grew up poor under the care of her grandmother, Catherine Anne, in Kyle, Texas. Her habit of giving herself an absolutely false but very elegant southern upbringing, complete with Big House and faithful darkies, is well-documented.

[28] The incidence of lynching in Texas and elsewhere in the south is also well-documented; the recent murder in Jasper, Texas is easily seen as a late instance of the same kind systematic terrorism.

[29] I do not mean to say that earlier times lacked some awareness of this; yet when we believe our beliefs to be permeable to one another, and absolutely relative (an interesting juxtaposition of words that speaks volumes on the subject), their vulnerability to time and chance, and the *absolute* death of species extinction, certainly makes any anxiety the more intense.

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ASLEEP IN THE ARMS OF GOD

. . . I leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?

— Christopher Marlowe

He was old he is not real nothing is real
Nor the noise of death drawing water

— W. S. Merwin

It's just another proof that the herding instinct in man predominates over rational considerations, from which we may derive whatever of cheer there is in the thought that when our leaders finally "run violently down a steep place into the sea," we shall all follow and, swinelike, have the gregarious satisfaction of perishing together.

— Roy Bedichek

PART ONE

1901

—Where is Wafer?

She said it with a smile. She said it again:

—Where is Wafer?

and the toddler giggled and took his hands away from his face. He knew this game, and when the woman cried out at him:

—There he is!

the child clapped his hands delightedly, and laughed and laughed.

The woman was his mother and her face was smooth and pale and her teeth smiling glowed in the yellow lamplight. The child slapped at the air excitedly, rocked forward and back on his mother's leg; and she caught him as he leaned over so far, beginning to slip, he was like to

fall.

The days with her were long and warm. The house was kept shuttered and closed under the shade of the trees about it and so was not hot. The heat of the day outside was almost violent. In the evening, they all came out, onto the dogtrot porch, and sat there in caneback chairs as a breeze sluiced like cool water through the open place between the two blockhouses of the cabin. The cabin already old in this, a young country. It was early in the new century. The breeze going past went onward, and soughed in the branches of the trees, like a soft voice never quite rising to intelligibility. A soft voice that whispered words vital, profound, mysterious. But you never could quite puzzle them out.

The woman sat with the child in a chair in the evening cool. The two men smoked and talked. All of them were sitting on the dogtrot porch of the old house. It was well-built, in the German manner, with mitered joints adzed out of the logs, that would drain every drop of water, and so undecayed it stood solid yet in spite of all that rain, cold, wind, heat, and storm could do. The child was just a year old. His new young mother bounced him on her knee, and chanted in sing-song:

—Trot, trot to Boston to buy some bread.
Woops! Look out! 'Cause the pony's dead.
What you gonna do? When you need more bread?

—the wide "O" of his mother's mouth in mock sorrow—.

—Can't go back. 'Cause the pony's dead—

and the child laughing and the voices of the two men and the voice still yet in the trees that whispered, whispered. Not understood. Behind and beneath the child's bright laughter.

—Hear tell about it? His uncle Jeff Rupert said to his father Waylon. —The party?

—I've heard about it, the father allowed. About used up, ain't they?

The uncle ruminated momentarily, into the cup of his hands. —Do you think so?

—Where is Wafer? said the woman. —Where is Wafer?

and the child squealed with pleasure.

—Where is he? Where is he?

Another season, with the leaves turning orange and red, and the bloated sun less molten where it rode. Time slips that way. Wafer rode on his father's back in the yard. His father held him on his shoulders and they walked the raked dirt of the yard, and the boy loved the high place. He swayed in the air and the earth was at his feet. He saw his cousins—Jeff Rupert they all called Junior, and Hugh Junior's brother, and his father who was also Jeff Rupert. His father swung him like a weight on a rope, and he howled in delight at his own weight, squeezing down into his toes; or reversed, the blood that filled his skull; or the movement inside, at being flung about so. His realness pressing him.

Then weightless, for the instant he was separate from his father's hand. Not real; something else. Some*where* else. Only to topple down again into being his daddy's son, and his daddy's laughing face loomed up, and the sharp tobacco-and-sweat smell, and the hard, dry hands that caught and held him. While Hattie watched from the door of the new kitchen his father had built with the help of Hattie's husband, Ward. Sometimes she smiled, in spite of herself.

Sometimes his Uncle Jeff would play with him, too. And he played with his cousins. Before he was five, he could pluck those names from the air somehow, and knew who was who. And knew there was a place called Perrin, nearest them in the almost treeless plains of the

Keechi Valley; and another further away named Jacksboro. And beyond that, the wide, wide world that was the rest of Jack County. That was where Mineral Wells was.

* * *

The winter of his second year, there came a day that his mother wept, and he watched her weep, and it frightened him, even as distant as it seemed. Outside the cold had its way with things, and battered at the cabin. His eyes watching wide and round with wonder. His mother's eyes were squeezed tight shut, as if sheer pressure would force upon them another thing than was there; or as if they were fruit, from which she pressed with the heels of her hands bitter juice; or as if she did not wish to see anything, ever again; and the boy ever fuller with wonder, and with fear.

His mother wept a long, bitter, heartfelt time. The nigger that brought the news sulked in the kitchen. Nigger Hattie held Wafer; it was from the nest of nigger Hattie's arms that Wafer watched. Nigger Hattie held the child on her hip, and the child clung to the woman, who smelled of woodsmoke, and the snuff she dipped unceasingly, and the sweat of her long hours working. She took the child to the kitchen. She fed the nigger who waited there. He left, wrapped up and hunched against the cold, on the mule that had brought him.

His father returned from the evening feeding of the stock. He stamped like thunder. He stamped the cold from his feet. He stood at the table, with his one hand rested on the back of his wife's chair, the other on her shoulder, looking uncomfortably on at the extravagance of her tears. He offered her without patience obligatory comfort. He stared cryptically at Wafer, where Wafer sat now at the same table, eating a bowl of Hattie's stew. The boy ate steadily, but was not oblivious to the quality of that gaze. The father stared. Then shook himself all over, like a

dog shedding water, and moved to his own seat at the table, and Hattie brought him stew. He sat after, picking his teeth with a bone, regarding silently Wafer's now-silent mother. The mother did not eat.

—So when is it? he asked her.

And the mother wept anew her answer, —Tomorrow.

His father grunted. —We'll need to go.

In the cabin it was warm. They slept the sleep of the righteous. Nigger Hattie slept somewhere else. The next day, his mother stood in her good black dress, her good black leather high-button shoes, her hat with the black flowers, the fur collared coat, and she and her husband were going. Nigger Hattie held him again in her arms, watching. And Wafer watched too, and clung to her while his father smiled at him thinly.

—Can't go, little man, he said. Can't go this time.

—He be all right, said nigger Hattie

—You take care of that child, said his father.

Eyes to the floor. —Yessir, she said.

Ruefully, the father said, —The old bastard sure picked a damned inconvenient time of year to die in, didn't he?

The mother took in her breath sharply; the father stared moodily out the windows his wife had been so proud of the day he brought them home. He stared at the blowing sleet and freezing rain; thinking probably of the long buggy ride, out and back to the country church, and the country plot, where his wife's father was buried that day. And the mother said fiercely:

—You hush, Waylon Roberts.

and his father wore his good black suit, and his good black hat. Outside, in agonies of cold, the mules brayed. A thin, stinging sleet from the north. It had happened that the hooves of animals had frozen, right to the ground, in such weather; to walk themselves to slow death on bleeding, gangrenous stumps. His father had little mercy to spare for mules, yet they were an expense. The sky through the windows was a menacing gray. His father said:

—It's true.

and his mother said:

—To say such a thing.

and patted her hat, and fiddled with her clothes. She picked up heavy blankets from the bed, and took from the table hot bricks wrapped in heavy towels, prepared by Hattie.

His mother said, all business now, —We best be gone.

They went out the door. There was gruffness in his father's voice, even more than usual. Muffled and past comprehending; the clatter of his mother's shoes on the stepup, when his father boosted her in; his father complaining, as he stuffed the blankets around the mother's legs, and put a hot brick near her feet. That done, the buggy's suspension creaked while he heaved up himself. And arranged his own blanket and brick. And took the reins, and faced into the sleet. The church was two and a half miles away.

Hattie said a few words softly in the space between Wafer's cheek and her own breast. The tone was the important thing. She moved toward the glowing potbelly stove in the far corner, resting on its square of brick on the wood floor. Outside, his father's whip whistled and snapped; Wafer imagined the withers and rumps of the mules, rippling away from the sound, the threatening breath of the scourge in the air above them, and he heard the high yipping bray

clearly, as the two set themselves to the harness, convulsed equally with fear and with pain; and his father's voice shouting:

—Up, you!

and the rattle and jingle of the chains and the squeak of the harness leather and the whine of the wheel bearings in their beds of cold grease, as mules and buggy lurched at once toward the road. Nigger Hattie said, in one of her few utterances regarding the vagaries of white people:

—Bastard—.

and spat a brown stream at the stove—as she was normally forbade to do indoors—where it sizzled in a brief spume of white smoke, and was gone. She turned to face the child, and smiled. Her warm brown almond eyes held his own, blue; and clear as day.

* * *

Winter was over, by-and-by. The grass grew thick on the grave of his mother's father, which was near to nothing for the boy, who had known the man no more than death itself; and near enough to nothing for his father, too. Of his own desire, Wafer never thought at all of the old man, who once or twice gave him candy. Nor of very much else, except all he saw that was new. And that was everything. There was a cycle to things, that he seemed to know effortlessly, without the need of being told; and it was not to be denied, that cycle; not by ignorance, or by design. Though the life of a family is another thing. The church they all attended, now as before and always, as far back as anyone knew, stood in a prairie fastness beside a great tree, one of a motte clustered at the creekbed hard by. A live oak, whose roots heaved at the earth, and clutched it deep and fearsome.

Hard by the church was the graveyard. As if they were thought of together. A small

white clapboard church, peeling in the sun. And the mottled gray slate tombstones, devoured by lichen, riven by frost, the years driving into them like nails, ever deeper in the stone, to have off the names that were carved there. To obliterate not remembrance but being. And Wafer frolicked amongst them. There were older ones actually nameless now, the stone washed as innocent of writing as a bed of sand. Some of the graves sunk in, the shape of the unseen coffin's collapse marked out in curbs of sloughed earth. Perhaps these had been marked by markers as perishable as wood. Others were marked with slabs of rock that never had seen a chisel, built up over the grave in a cairn. No crypt, however crude or crafty, mattered in the end.

A fresher tombstone was the object of his mother's visits. The grandfather, who had died an eternity ago. A year and more. His grave was outlined with a border of painted stones, as proof against the years as flesh. His name was fresh, and in granite, not in slate. His mother sat for hours on a wood bench nearby, before and after services, and odd days of the week. The bullet headed preacher sometimes joined her there. They shared a peach, or an apple, or a pear, in the seasons for such. And spoke of God. The mother and the preacher. That was when Wafer played among the graves. Wafer's father and nigger Hattie's husband Ward had made the bench.

Once Wafer leapt on a stone crypt. The stones shifted at his leap. He tumbled into the dust, wailing; as the cairn fell in behind him. His mother came, with an apple core in her hand, the bald placid preacher in her wake, who angrily scolded Wafer's irreverence, gesturing at the fallen ruin of the old, nameless cairn. Yet the person in the grave did not complain. Wafer watched without speaking this rage of the preacher. It was a new thing, but did not impress him. He reverenced the dead, and knew it. They who spoke not at all. Nor were they foolish when they scolded him. He said to the foolish preacher:

—That'un at your elbow knows you.

and ran away to play, more and elsewhere, his mother and the preacher standing awkward and amazed a little, in the wake of his indifference, which they would see, by and by, offered them certain advantages. And the dead never spoke at all. Yet they were there. It was their place.

* * *

On Mondays, his mother washed, in three great galvanized number three tubs; clouds of steam, and mounds of laundry, and sagging clotheslines. Old Nigger Hattie came down from Aunt Emma Sweet to lend a hand. Wafer loved Old Nigger Hattie; he liked it when she was there. And that was Monday. Tuesday his mother would iron and put up clothes all day. Tuesday gone, as and where days go, on Wednesday she canned. The basement of their house was stacked floor to ceiling with gray glass mason jars of canned vegetables and fruits. Thursdays in the spring and the summertime they hoed in the garden. Friday night they all bathed. Always there was cleaning. Always there was cooking. And always, there was the care of the child. Yet more and more of this devolved to Old Nigger Hattie. His mother seemed to grow tired.

He learned that his mother's name was Ola. Sometimes, Avis Seymour came from Elmore Roberts, the other way down the road, to help with all there was to do on the small home place. Avis was a nigger, too. They paid niggers to help out, Wafer knew even then. They just didn't pay them much. He knew that, too. Leaving which aside, all days ended on the porch, just the same as if there were such a thing as justice. And sometimes—often—his uncle Jeff Rupert came the short way down the road and sat with his Daddy and they smoked, Waylon his pipe, uncle Jeff the cigarettes he rolled slowly in one hand. He liked his uncle Jeff Rupert, too— Jeff

Rupert always took the time to talk to Wafer—sometimes he brought his own boys, Junior and Hugh.

Wafer knew by then that no one really had very much of anything. That the only plentiful things hereabout were the food they hunted and grew for themselves, and the work they set themselves to do—most of them farmed cotton and raised stock on the side—for what little money could be had that way. Uncle Jeff Rupert and his Daddy spoke, of things that Wafer didn't know. His father had a beard and black eyes; he knew that. Jeff Rupert had blue eyes, like Wafer; and auburn hair, like Wafer's mother.

—They gonna tell me how I ought to farm? Waylon asked. How I ought to vote? I knowed a long time about the Alliance. That People's Party business. That sounds like Reds to me. And then all that fusion bidness.

—That's the democrats, Jeff Rupert said. They're tryin to take it all over.

Waylon shrugged. —Just as well vote democrat, he said.

—Give them a chance, said Jeff. They might get you more than eight-and-a-half cents a pound.

Waylon shook his head. —I been a democrat all my life. I ain't studyin a change.

—It costs eight cents a pound to grow the stuff.

The woman cried, —Where is Wafer? Where is Wafer? Wafer turned and stared at the mother and did not move. He no longer cared for this game.

The woman cried, —There he is!

But where else could he be?

* * *

He was three. The father and the uncle of the child spoke often. It was something between them, the uncle glancing at Wafer as they spoke. The uncle was the brother of the child's mother, a Sweet. But they were Robertses. That was different than a Sweet. And Hattie and Avis were niggers, and that was some other thing than the thing he was. Wafer thought Avis a little mean. But he loved Hattie. Hattie, who gave him small kindnesses, sorghum candy, and a buttered slice of pound cake.

In the dark beyond the house were coyotes. He heard them of a night. Not waking yet not asleep, one other thought aflame, small in all that vast and populous dark. When he thought of coyotes, he thought of teeth and tails, something like the dogs his father kept. The coyotes didn't bark, though. The Mexicans, still another thing, said they sang:

—Ooooooooooooooooooo.

el cantador—of their secrets, in the bush. A cry like an announcement. Thus and such born. This one and this wedded and bedded. A complaint. This and that gone awry. This other thing turned topsy-turvy. That one is dead. Or a story, which could hold all that within it, and more besides.

* * *

He slept in the dark cabin close by the bed of his father and his mother. He woke in the night, when there were noises he didn't know. A little of that, and these were noises he did know. Later, he slept through the night easily. Later still, he slept in the lean-to room built on the cabin's back. He was still small then, but he was growing. He knew where Wafer was, if he did not know all there was to know about him, or about anything. He had a place in the light of the world. In the dark there was no place, and no world, and no uncle or aunt or cousins, and no

niggers, and no mother and father, and no Mexicans, and not even he. A hole in things, where all of that used to be. In terrors like these, he awaited the coming of the day. And the breathing in the room with him of those who were his own became more yet to him, than phantoms drifting.

The breath in the room, that was itself the same void, took on with its spirit, flesh, and that was the dawn. He was four years old, and he sat Sundays in the pew with his father and his mother. And the congregation sang of things unseen:

—He walks with me,
And he talks with me—

—while in the choir, mostly women and girls sang from the two small pews in the sanctuary. The occasional boy or man, too, in pursuit of some girl. Who sat with a prim mouth, as far away from her pursuer as possible. While the upper windows of the still, hot church beneath the great spreading oak were slanted open. The congregation fluttered, ruffled with fans working hard at sweat-sheened faces. Outside, in the summertime, you could see the heat rise from those windows, ripples in the air like distant water, like spirits wafting off to heaven.

—Oh Lamb of God,
I come. I come—

And on each fan a painted scene: a decorous Gethsemane, a goreless crucifixion, or perhaps an astonished Joseph, waylaid by his brothers, on one side; and on the other an advertisement, for Tyndal's Hardware of Jacksboro, Texas, All Your Farming and Ranching Needs, Proud Always to Support Local Churches. Church could be very noisy, too. Lots of hollering and whooping. And not a little jumping about.

* * *

Everyone was at church, not only Sunday mornings, but most Wednesday nights, too. A

small airless clapboard building, on a muddy gray road that fed off another muddy gray road, barely risen itself to the dignity of white caliche. Away off the beaten track, beside on the one hand a pasture, and on the other a field of grain. A modest steeple, without a bell, above the single story. A bell on a stand beside the front door. The rope ran through an eyelet, its end tied to the bell's rocker. The preacher, brother Earl, came down the steps. He pulled the rope and the bell rocked and the clapper struck clear fine notes from the old rusted bell. The preacher had a head as smooth as an egg. It shone like water. He wore a starched shirt and a stiff collar and a string tie. He wore a dusty black swallowtail coat. He was solemn, holding his Bible. He stood by the openwork steps, squiring in all and sundry, to the dark insides of the church, the ceiling also the vault of the roof, beribbed with trusses, like the great bones of a great fish. His mother carried him past the preacher, the preacher's gimlet eyes watching her hungrily. His mother smelled of pears, and of roses. The preacher smelled of bluing and starch, of bile and disappointed expectations.

The preacher said so much, and most of it confusing. The boy sat between his mother and his father, and squirmed to look toward Junior and Hugh, who sat between their mother and father. What the preacher said washed over him like waves of a sea he didn't know the name of, the roll of an ocean he had never seen. Then he threw back his head and sat just so, staring up at the vault of the roof, while the preacher spoke of the Savior feelingly.

The preacher preached:

—SWEET JESUS save us poor sinners!

slapping his thigh and twirling on one foot, like a ballerina. Moving restlessly back and forth across the sanctuary, a tumble of words from his frothing mouth, sometimes hopping

rhythmically on one foot, beating time to the words he spoke; sometimes hopping up and down on two, like a tethered rabbit. He said:

—My Savior, he WALKETH with me and he TALKETH with me—.

—and danced a buck and a wing by the pulpit.

—And HIS is the TRUE REACHING HAND of REDEMPTION OH my brothers—.

—and casting wide his arms. His voice shaking with the power of his emotion.

—REACHES the same for YOU as for ME—.

—you could hear the capital letters in his voice. He intoned:

—OH my sisters—

—and Wafer's mother nodded, nodded, said:

—Amen—.

—with many another. And all the brothers and sisters of the preacher answered back, in voices like to his own, the church a moil of shouting, strange confluence of groveling with praise, while Wafer thought wonderingly: Savior. Savior. A very strong fellow. To save so many. All this whole churchfull. Wafer imagined a man with big arms. Hot black eyes. A beard.

Wafer watched a dust mote float above him, a mere fleck in the open structure vault of the church, where its reached up to heaven. Held up desperately by earth, all falling, all the same, of time and the dire slight weight of its existence. The open woodwork, joist on plate, brace to upright, plainly visible. Wafer thought:

—*That's God's*—

and stared rapt at the geometry, the dance of angles pointing skyward. The fleck floated and the fleck grew. It spiraled. Wafer floated himself, in a void of wooden beams. A smiling face in the

dust. Or was it only the dust that smiled? A pair of kindly eyes, and Wafer smiled back. And they smiled back at him. The figure of a young bearded man in a coat like the preacher's. He held out his hand. As if he stood, just so, beside the pew, where Wafer gaped. Wafer could not take the hand, but the figure moved, as if to speak.

Wafer cried out. His cry a sleepy moan.

His mother smacked his face with her openpalmed hand. She shook him fiercely by one shoulder, he groggily impassive. She gripped his hand hard, bringing him with a thump to face forward. From where he had slept, to awaken moaning, with his face buried in her shoulder. *Her* face had gone bright scarlet. Now his did, too. While his father grunted with suppressed laughter, which embarrassed Wafer all the more. The preacher was jumping all around the sanctuary, his exertions for Jesus undiminished. Either no one had noticed Wafer's cry, or those who had noticed, had taken it a sign of Wafer's own ecstasy.

And the preacher spread his arms wide. He whirled in place, dancing. His hand reached up and up. He spoke so fast, all a jumble, syllables piling up each on the next. His words blurred into unintelligibility. He slashed his hand down violently. Up. Down. Up. Speaking in rhythmic tongues, the congregation also leaping and shouting, women on their backs moaning. His father bemused, but his mother on her feet, shouting at the preacher, her face flushed scarlet—

—Amen! *Amen!*

—and the power in the words might just be their utter senselessness, or the heavier-still incomprehension of his listeners. The preacher himself toppled over backward, twitching. The wood dark behind him, above him, beneath him; it mimicked the splay of his arms; was the

template of his sprawling. The preacher's face, too, all red. Spit flying from his mouth in ribbons. His fists pounded on the floor like gunfire. He shrieked:

—Of the LAMB! BLOOD my brothers of the LAMB—

and from the congregation:

—*Amen*—.

—*A*-men—.

and Wafer wondered, that he himself did not bleed right out loud, and all the others with him, at the riot of feelings that clotted his throat, so strong they might choke him. When he looked up again, mote and face and kind soft eyes were gone.

And Wafer thought, —Where am I? *Who* am I—?

And didn't know. And knew it. He flushed with his knowing. The heat rose in his body. He slumped in the pew. His eyes rolled up in the back of his head. His mother, alarmed, shook him. He did not respond. His lips seemed drained of blood. His face pale also. His mother carried him out of the church, and away, in a great rush of people. Behind them the congregation whispered, whispered, the shout and clamor quite given over. His legs dangled like string from the cradle of her arms; his arms flopped lifelessly. His mother could no longer tell him who or where he was. He was six years old.

And for a time, he was sick. Red whelps dotted his body, angry half-circles, like small wafers of offered blood, round crusted pocks that didn't heal. He saw his father in his nightshirt, holding a lamp, bearded face grim as he chewed his lip. There above him hovered Hattie, fissured brown face solemn, and eyes yellow in the coal oil light. She smelled one time of the kitchen. And she smelled the next of work in the hot sun. But then a smell of pears: his mother

nearby. Hattie changed out the clammy sheets, the room heavy with the sweet, stinking smell of his fever, not unlike that of fermented silage; and Hattie soothed his brow with cool waters; whereupon a rush of sudden and terrifying clarity. The sweet fruit smell of his mother came near, and passed on.

The preacher came. He stank of anger and of envy, too, and the rage rolled off of him in waves. His presence choked the boy rigid. A dead thing in a black coat, looming in the watery depths of the room. Wafer thrashed on the bed, soiled himself, sweat like a cold glass on a warm day, his breath a labor and his heartbeat hammering and the roar of blood in his ears like a lion. Somehow, in his thrashing he saw the bearded man, who was not his father, and came to him there. Smiled with his kind eyes, shook his head. There was only the kindness there of a time unripe, as if the boy a fruit to pick and to eat. Or not. He raised a hand, it seemed (vague, terrible, drowned seeing) and placed it cool on Wafer's forehead, as if to say, pass onward.

He awoke one morning with only the scabs of the healing pocks, the sheets dry, his eyes clear again like noonday. Hattie in the doorway, wan and tired. His mother beside him on the bed. There had seemed to be, at the last, a great crowding rush of people, all placing sacred hands to his brow. They had whispered at him things he could not grasp, blessings all, words like wind in the trees. Now there was only his mother, and his father gone to the fields to work. It had rained, his mother said. The land had drunk it like a sponge, until it was full. And Wafer thought of the crawdads in the barditch by the road.

* * *

His Daddy clumped into the dogtrot each night, caked with filth and stinking of money. He stripped down, and sponged himself from the waist up, out of a bucket. Wafer's mother

standing by with a towel. Hattie at the table, ready to serve up the supper. Each morning, he watched his Daddy leave for the fields. He left behind him, in the powdery dust of the yard, the spaced, smooth prints of his brogans. Wafer sat on the porch, a biscuit yellow in his hand with the butter soaked in it, purple with the blood-like dollop of jelly, watching. Hattie in the door of the kitchen. His mother, less and less involved in the running of the household, still in the inward dark of the cabin, as if she hid there.

Each morning and night, nigger Hattie raked the yard. She raked in the dust great looping swirls, the tines scratching out spaced grooves, each stroke of the rake ending smoothly in the next, so a pattern grew. Hattie had already raked the whole yard, even by the early hour that Waylon left for work. His Daddy's prints were the first thing to mar its pattern. Followed by the hundred chickens pecking there all day, a new pattern of three-toed prints, a writing still more cryptic, which obliterated Hattie's labor. Until the hour before dusk, when she raked the whole yard again. And the first marks there, the steps of his father, returning home.

There were many things to do about the house. Wafer already had the smaller chores. Feed the chickens, slops the pig, gather the eggs, morning and night of every day of the world. But he had more than ample time to play. The ditch by the road just at the drive to the house was sometimes full of water, and there he caught crawdads, with a bent pin on a string, and pale white rags of fatback. Alien creatures the color of mud, not insects, but like them somehow. A strangeness that hummed inside his skull. They pinched at the bacon graspingly. Sometimes, pinched Wafer, too, with their cruel sharp pinchers, before he learned to avoid it. He often crushed them, throughout the years of his childhood. Whole slews of these strange, insectile, water-living aliens, murdered with a clack between two rocks; or underfoot with a crunch; and

always with absolute dispassion. Dead in a mess, and still quite beyond him. They died so silent, and so strange.

This was the year that Hattie and her husband Ward left the Sweets for good, and came to stay with the Robertses permanently. It was also the year his Daddy added the lean-to, for Wafer's own room. The year he built a new kitchen for Hattie, and improved their smokehouse, and added a small larder just behind the kitchen, where he channeled the trickle from a year-round spring. By-and-by there was a real icebox, which meant the expense of real ice. The Robertses were becoming prosperous.

Somewhere in there, Wafer turned seven years old. In the fall of the year, when the cotton and the yield of the garden were laid by, he went to the new school at Perrin. There were more children there than he knew there were at all, but he learned very quickly how to read, and did read all that fell to his hand. And he had even more of his own work to do, as he had now his own bed, in a room of his own. And his Daddy branched out from cotton, and started planting such grains—corn, wheat, oats—as this land had grown most abundantly from the very first Anglos of all, not much more than fifty years before. There was talk of oil, as had been found some years ago, down on the coast. The land was tired enough the grains wouldn't do quite as well, now. But they *would* do.

In the dark beyond the house were still Coyotes. He heard them of a night, not waking yet not asleep, harbingers of things he still yet did not understand. They said:

—Ooooooooooooooooooo.

in the night. And were fewer each year. Farmers and stockmen of all kinds hunting them down, and hanging their dead bodies from fencewire, splayed just so, like Jesus furred and fanged. The

coyotes were said to take goats, chicken, now and then even a calf. Wolves gone from this country long since—.

—*Ooooooooooooooooooo.*

—singing in the dark, mournful and alone, in no man's seeing.

* * *

Wafer had a dog, Boots, a small terrier. Hugh, a year older, gave it to him. Together they ran the fields and streams, Wafer and Boots. His father hoorawed them from the cattle, for fear of trampling. The dog was at his heels when he gathered the warm eggs from the chicken roosts, morning and evening. Leaping in his shadow, when he ran errands in season through the cottonfields for his Daddy. The pickers dragging the long sacks behind. Sure black fingers, plucking deftly the clean white puff of cotton from the green boll. His father warned away Boots and Wafer, from the stored silage corn, for fear of rats. The dog smelled of the cedar shavings he slept on. The silage was stored not in a silo, but in windrows tacked under canvas, not far from the stock pens and barn. And of course, forbidden so, they went to it sooner than later.

Where there are rats there will be snakes. One day there was a snake, and the dog, the way that terriers have, of chasing a thing down its hole, went after it. Wafer ran up behind the dog, where it snarled and wuffled and dug in the soft sandy loam of the hole the snake had slithered in. Only its hindquarters showing, and a shower of dirt. Wafer pitched in beside the dog, digging with his own hands, oblivious of his own peril. The dog cried out, backed away hard, sat down on its rump. This had been a snake that ought be left alone. Boots scrabbled with his forepaws at his muzzle. And the blood simply would not stanch, but flowed from the two deep puncture wounds steady. The dog's tongue swoll black in his mouth. There could only be

one end.

And then his face, like a bursting thing, puffed up as if it were a bladder, blown full of air. The dog lost control of his bowels; Wafer and his mother cleaned it up. But she shook her head when she did it. Boots lay on a cloth. A glistening black turd oozed out of the dog. The dog never moved, save languid single shakes of its tail. The dog's eyes pleaded. Its tongue dried to an oozing, crusted gray, where it stuck out of its mouth like a joke. While Wafer wept, as he never would weep again, and asked first his mother, then his father: why? But they had no answer. The snout split open and black blood flowed. The eyes swoll shut. The dog's own teeth slashed its flews, as it chomped convulsively, attempting to close with an invisible enemy. Such as it could, the dog whimpered; soon enough, with its tongue puffed up like fat sausage, it could not open its mouth at all.

Wafer's father said what must be done. It would be a mercy, he said. It must be done, he repeated. His eyes gave back no more than any mirror. The boy wailed, and the father went off and did what had to be done, his rifle slung on his shoulder, the dog in his arms, a spade awkward in one hand. The dog's legs and tail hung down like string. The boy sat weeping in his mother's lap. There were two cracks of his father's rifle. Old nigger Hattie's impassive black face hovered at the kitchen door. She held Wafer's eyes over his mother's shoulder. But she did not speak. The father returned, with the spade, blood on the bladetip, gripped in his hand, and his rifle slung. In the night of that day, Wafer dreamed.

He dreamt he saw the dog rise from the shallow grave where his father placed it. There were two holes in the dog's neck, one directly over the spine. In the dream, Wafer's father stood above the dying dog. The dog feebly wagged its tail. And his father swung the shovel once, and

twice, and again, and blood was on the bladetip, and in his scooped-out dish of earth, the dog quivered when death rushed upon him. In Wafer's dream his father turned, and loomed above the grave in his black coat and hat. His father shouldered his rifle, and fired twice into the grave, at the dog's convulsing body. The bill of his father's hat was downturned; shadows crept in his father's face, hiding the eyes in caverns of dark. In the dream, his father covered the still-twitching dog. In his dream, Wafer asked:

—Where am I?

and slept on, as Boots did too, only elsewhere. Because no one knew. Who *could* know where he was, if, in his dream, he did not know his father? Outside, the coyotes with the pale moon celebrate a last scrap of offal to stanch their hunger. They scratched it ready from the shallow earth.

* * *

Wafer had hauled water from the well to his mother's kitchen from the time he was seven. There was a huge tank in the corner of the new kitchen, much larger than the old one, and he still hauled water there for Hattie. His mother worked in the kitchen much less than she had before. Once filled, the tank held enough water for a normal day, though it didn't hold water sufficient for a wash nor a bath day. The days when these things were done—Fridays and Mondays—there was still more of it to haul, and Hattie and Ward hauled it, too, and Avis—who still came sometimes to help—and Wafer again, when he returned home from school. It was the place of boys to haul water to their mother's kitchen, and that was Wafer's first and longest chore, that he would keep until he was a man.

So it happened that Wafer, one Monday wash day, brought in his last two pails—extra

pails, to please Hattie—and he entered the kitchen to find not Hattie, as long since accustomed, but strangely his mother. A great mounded pile of pears stood by on the table, ready for canning, and the kitchen stove radiated heat. Wafer saw the preacher, turning abruptly away from his mother, just as his mother's eyes, seeing him, widened. She stood with her back to the countertop, pushed up against it, gripping its edge tightly with both hands. She was flushed. The preacher, brother Earl, ran his hand delicately across his bald bullet head, staring hungrily at Wafer, his eyes glowing with a strange light. The hackles rose on Wafer's neck. His mother said:

—Wafer?

—very plaintively, and her fingertips touched her lips lightly, a gesture much like that of brother Earl, while Wafer stood, with the buckets in his hand. Mute. Until he finally said,

—I brought you these two for startin out. For the cannin—.

and his voice trailed and there was silence. They all three stared into the silence. His mother's voice quavered at last:

—Thank you, Wafer.

and he said, inanely:

—So Hattie and Ward wouldn't have none to haul awhile yet.

and she nodded jerkily. And added again:

—Thank you.

—and finally the afterthought:

—Say howdy to brother Earl.

Wafer thought of when he was little, a thought that seemed to come from nowhere. His

mother would wash with basin and pitcher, and Wafer waiting on the bed; her blouse, foaming at the waist like a fall of water into a pool; his father also on the bed, watching not Wafer, but his mother, with eyes like shining coal, and only the hint of a smile. He felt dizzy: throughout the kitchen hung the sweet heavy odor of the pears. He had the same sick feeling now that had risen in him then. His mother's green eyes watched him while he sat down the buckets by the stove, near the storage tank. He muttered a greeting to the blackvested preacher. He was flush with embarrassment, a harsher feeling than he'd ever known, even the day his mother shook him awake in the middle of church, but didn't half know why. Wretched, he took off his hat and twisted it in his hands.

Hattie stepped in the door. She seemed to take it all in, in a glance. She moved on the stove with her bundle of split logs, her face a schooled blank poem. She touched Wafer's shoulder. Her eyes told him to leave. Water for the canning boiled, steaming hotly, a constant background hiss. The kitchen heated steadily. Wafer said, —I got to get on.

—You take care, said Hattie.

And he left them there. The both of them standing there, like trees with tangled branches, swaying in an Autumn wood. Hattie, working at the stove, steadily, expressionless. Wafer was ten years old.

* * *

Late in November, men and boys from all around gathered for the pig hunt. They would hunt the thickets near the West Keechi, not far from Perrin. There was a place cleared in the woods, where two fires roared. On one of these a pot, where water boiled; the other an open blaze. There were poles cut and laid across uprights fashioned from the forked limbs of trees.

There were rounds of hemp rope, coiled like bristly and improbable rattlers, flung on the ground nearby. There were smaller fires, where coffee boiled. The smaller boys gathered firewood. Three sledges were parked at the edge of the clearing; mules were hitched to them. Some had been there since the night before; Waylon Roberts and Jeff Rupert Sweet, and the boys Wafer and Junior and Hugh, arrived in the dark of the morning. Hattie's husband Ward had been there since the night before; he would drive a sledge for old man Raupe. Coffee was drunk; some ate breakfast. In twos and threes, men and the middling-large boys began to move out, into the smoking woods.

Junior, Wafer, and Hugh all carried weapons. They had gathered wood with the young ones in years before; they were just now old enough to hunt. The old men, and the herd of the younger boys, were left behind with the fires and the camp equipage. They moved into the bush. Wafer, lost in the tangled skein of brush and tree, stopped at the hard grip of his father's hand on his shoulder; it hurt.

—Wake up, boy, his father said.

A man ahead of them motioned one way with his hand, jerked his head another; Wafer's father nodded. They all went together the way of the hand. The man watched them as they passed. He was looking back the way they had come. Ahead, though it seemed not possible, the underbrush thickened. They threaded through it. Wafer again felt a hand grip his shoulder; he turned his face into Uncle Jeff's gray stubble. Uncle Jeff said, —Quiet now, boys.

A rustle in the brush. Snuffle and grunt of hogs.

—Go around yonder ways, Jeff, whispered Waylon. Take Wafer.

They made a stealthy advance from two directions. There was a tangle of low gray brush

dead ahead, laced through with a second tangle of deadfall trees. The thickest of thickets, choked down with a decades-old slough of overgrowth. From within, a snort, and a sudden squeal, and a pig charged out to meet them.

It moved on its fat stubby legs with amazing speed, its backbone sharp and prominent, thinner than any pig that Wafer had ever seen, its rib-bones prominent, too, and two long snaggled teeth pointing up from its lower jaw, and Wafer murmured:

—God almighty.

as Uncle Jeff and his father fired almost simultaneously from two directions. Two jets of blood sprang from midbody of the pig. In a sudden cloud of pink foam, the pig collapsed. A puddle grew beneath it, bright on the dull brown loam; the blood seemed to eat like a fire through the dry tinder. In the midst of the puddle, the pig convulsed. It shat itself. Wafer stood openmouthed staring. Hugh and Junior exchanged a look. All three boys seemed stunned.

—Are you all right? In his excitement, Uncle Jeff's hands shook.

Wafer nodded. Uncle Jeff turned to Hugh and Junior. —Are you boys all right?

Both of his sons nodded. Hugh held his mouth tight and stared at the ground.

Waylon said, —Here comes the sledge.

They heard it crunching through the brush, drawn by the gunfire. A muleteam appeared, old man Raupe behind it flicking a rope at the lead mule. A gaunt gray old man, dressed in khakis and a slouch hat. He rubbed his stubble and cursed fluently. Nigger Ward, Hattie's husband, followed along behind.

—*Gee!* said old man Raupe, flicking the rope at the mule's right flank. Withers and haunches aflutter with the fear of it. —*Haw!* Get *along* there you lardassed piece of shit, he

hissed.

—Just a minute here, said Waylon. He slung his rifle and entered the thicket where the pig had been.

—Whoa, now, said old man Raupe. He fished out a bandanna, mopped his face, wet with sweat even in this cool air, and crammed it back in his pocket. He regarded the three boys, who were still staring at the dead pig. He said, —What the hell's wrong with you boys? Never see a pig shot?

—It's the size, said Junior.

—They die a lot messier than a squirrel or a rabbit, said Wafer.

—I could kill me one, said Hugh. I *will* kill me one.

—Better get to it, boy, said old man Raupe. This here one is done already dead.

He winked at nigger Ward, who smiled briefly in response. Nodding at the pig bleeding out on the loam, he added, We'll have his guts in the brushpile twenty minutes from now. How long did you think it'd take? We could skin you up about as quick.

—Go easy, Raupe, said Jeff Rupert.

Wafer's father came out of the brush with a piglet in each hand. He said, —Looka here.

—You want to kill em or keep em? old man Raupe asked. He took the piglets, holding them as Waylon had done, by the scruff. They squealed and struggled in his hands.

I don't study keepin no hogs this year, he answered.

—Let's get on huntin, said Uncle Jeff. We got more families than yours to feed here, Waylon.

—You mean we count? Asked Hugh.

He stared dully at a point on the ground, just left of the dead pig, as his father stopped stock still. He turned his head, and stared at Hugh hard. Hugh's eyes were a study in distance; he did not meet his father's look. Everyone else seemed to have gone stone deaf. Jeff Rupert opened his mouth as if he would speak. He was clearly angry. But he moved off with Waylon abruptly, not glancing back at Hugh even once.

Both of the grown men moved off stealthily through the brush while the boys watched. They moved sure and quiet, amazingly so, it seemed to Wafer. The set of Jeff's shoulders told that he knew what eyes bored his back. Hugh's blue eyes were hot.

—Good God, said Junior. How do they move so quiet?

Old man Raupe dropped the two piglets beside the dead sow. He stepped into the brush, where the other piglets were. Nigger Ward searched around on the ground for a stick of wood. The two piglets thrashed, painted with dirt and the sow's blood. Old man Raupe methodically handed all the piglets out to nigger Ward, who picked up each by each, by its hind legs, and laying it against a convenient rock, bashed out the skull. He threw the dead piglets on the sledge one by one, to butcher for the fire, or to dispose of in the brush, with the offal of the slaughter. He reached for the last two piglets—the two first carried out by Waylon—where they lay soaked in the sow's blood, thrashing and snuffling. He swung them by their hind legs, along a short arc through the air, and even as they struck the rock once, twice, a third time, pedaling their front feet, they squealed. Shrill sounds of dying. And then they did die, and were silent.

—Damn, Hugh whispered. Old man Raupe laughed. The three boys reddened, exchanging furtive glances. Shamefaced, they stepped neat of foot past the carnage. Noisily into the brush, in pursuit of their fathers. They spent the whole day hunting.

They sat that night about the fires. Guns stacked here and there against the tree boles; the night black beyond the red-and-yellow globe of the firelight, the shade of it leaping amid the brush. Behind the seated boys and men, the pale white bodies of fourteen pigs, flayed and eviscerated, bristles singed off in a roll through the fire, hung by their heels from the rack in a neat row, the long wooden pole skewered through their ankles. Smoke rose in the trees, and hung there. Hunks of pig meat, skewered on green sticks of mesquite, sizzled in the flames. The men passed bottles and jugs. Boys of all ages looked on. In the dark beyond the firelight, more than a few of the boys got the chance at a sample. One boy was toasted at length, the hero of the moment, who had made a fine, difficult shot that day.

Waylon Roberts sat a log whittling. Long flakes of wood curled from the shine of his knifeblade, peeling away almost like live things. Jeff Rupert leaned over, talking earnestly with Wafer. They camped all five together, in a hollow in the sandy clearing, a place where a campbed might be made, a hole dug easily, for the ease of a sleeping man's hip. Junior and Hugh had gone off somewhere. Old man Raupe was telling a story. He belched pork and moonshine, scowling at the burn in his throat. He cocked an eye to the meat, asizzle in the flames. A little drunk, he talked to everyone and no one.

—Most folks buried they valuables, the old man said. Of course, that was before Mackenzie broke the backs of em, at Palo Duro. Kilt they pony herd. Before then, everbody had a house like a fort anyhow, and anything of value they had, they buried or hid some other way. Not that a Comanch would know money, necessarily. But they'd know gold. They'd been tradin with the Mexicans, the Comancheros, long enough to know that. And they learned quick, I want to tell you. Don't let nobody tell you they was ignorant. They wasn't.

Jeff Rupert spoke in a low, quiet voice that didn't carry. His eyes held Wafer's and his voice was full of a passion that seemed out of place, as though he somewhere poured out a thing he'd had to hold close for too long, but this was the wrong place to pour it; and Wafer listened, even though he didn't always understand, as if he were himself the vessel his strangely wistful uncle would fill.

Jeff Rupert said to Wafer, —Have you thought at all of what you'll do after high school?

Wafer answered, —I ain't so sure I'll even finish.

—You got to do that, said Jeff.

—Daddy? said Hugh. Hugh sat down, between Waylon's log and Jeff Rupert's. His voice was full of something or other, too, but even harder to peg. He had been at a jug of 'shine with other boys, beyond the firelight. He said thickly, —You reckon you could talk to us, too, Daddy? Just a little?

Jeff Rupert met the eyes of his youngest briefly. He turned back to Wafer. The bodies of the day's swine glowed softly in the firelight, hung as they were, in a row, like men lynched by dapper murderers, who'd keep the carnage as neat as they could. Waylon sat rocking back and forth narrowly, at ease on his log, knife in his one limp hand, the naked stick in the other, and the curls of bark and of good white wood peeled away at his feet in a pile. He seemed sleepy. He thought maybe of his sister, Ola, wife and mother elsewise, and her husband and sons now before him. He did not share his thoughts, whatever they were.

Junior stumbled in front of the fire, swaying, his feet uncertain. Jeff Rupert Sweet ignored his angry youngest son; he also ignored this second obvious drunkenness. That may have been the reason why Junior moved a little more apart from the fire and the company around

it—to forestall the possibility of getting caught, not knowing he already *was* caught, and it didn't matter. Junior's overalls were unbuckled, and gathered at his waist, as though he were overheated. He sat down with a thump, his red longhandles gray in the firelight. His eyes regarded it. His eyes were blue, like his father's, blue like his brother's, blue like Wafer's. And in them, the fire was also blue. Old man Raupe went on with his story.

—Up on that ridge they watched the valley, he said. Waiting for a time, and a target. Sherman passed right close, the man himself, but somehow, they left him be. And not all that far from there, right on that same Salt Creek Prairie, and that the very same day, a few others of Kiowa and Comanch, maybe even from the same warparty, caught nigger Britt hisself.

He nodded sadly and sagely.

—They kilt nigger Britt stone-dead, and him with a hank of black hair in one hand, like he'd plucked one of em bald. While they killed him, them other Comanch, waitin on the hill, never moved, not until their scouts come in, with word of the Warren wagontrain. Out of Jacksboro. Eight or ten men. That was what Satanta and Big Tree had been waitin for, a rich, fat target. They caught those teamsters in the middle of the Salt Creek Prairie, with not a house nor a tree for miles.

—What happened? Wafer asked. What went with em?

—These was Kiowa and Comanch, said the old man. They did what they do. One teamster, name of Smith, I think, they strapped to a wagon tongue. They builded up a fire beneath him. They left him tied there—. Well. They left him long enough. I knew one of them fellers what run away. Lickety split, acrost that open prairie of salt grass. Without a pause and without a backward glance, and I don't blame him. He said you could hear the screams a mile

and more away. Smith, you know. Screaming and screaming.

Junior was almost green. Hugh stumbled off in the dark to vomit. Jeff sat, staring vaguely and sadly at Wafer, his nephew. Wafer heard Hugh away in the dark, retching horribly. Waylon twirled his stick and his knife. Old man Raupe idled at his knit fingers, clasped across his chest, as if he remembered something, or as if he listened. He farted fragrantly. Further off in the dark, in the far brush further still than Hugh, were rending sounds of animals, battling for the offal of the slaughtered pigs. Wafer looked toward the noise. The struggle intensified suddenly, and a sound—

—*Yip, yip!*

—and a squeal, as of something there injured. Hugh stumbled back into the firelight, and half-fell next to his brother. Wafer stood. No reason. His eyes in the firelight like saucers, and the ghostly, looming carcasses of pigs white behind him, where Hugh sits, too, at last; sullen, with his mouth loose and moist. Was there ought to do, or anyone to do it, maybe there had been more. Old man Raupe seemed to go right along, conscious only of his own long, ruminant pause, as if nothing had interrupted him.

—They bones is with us yet, he said. Lipan graves, or Caddo, just the top of this here ridge. Yonder where them rocks is piled. Lipan, or Caddo, or maybe even Comanch. All acrost the county.

And he belched like a gunshot: once, sharp and short. The murmur of other men, talking at other fires, restless in the middle distance. Nigger Ward moved to make his bed, and Waylon spoke for the first and only time that night. His words brought Ward to an abrupt stop, and he stood and listened while Waylon spoke. Waylon said, without looking up:

—Not here, nigger. Move along.

Nigger Ward slept in the cold, well away from the fires. His sleep, if not worse or better than anyone else's, was much less secure. It seemed to Wafer, later, lying alone in the dying fireglow, that it took an extra-special long time to fall asleep. And at that, with no real need to close his eyes. The fires died down and the noise with them. He slept at last, and if he dreamt that night, he did not remember.

Wafer woke to sunlight, tumbling through the leafless branches like rain; there was a thin mist at ground level, risen from the creek, softly clinging to the boles of the trees. The air bit shrewdly. The fires were burnt down to coals, men and boys disposed about them, sleeping, rolled in their blankets. Wafer's back was cold, his front warm, and the sun lit what seemed a cloudless sky, save only high winter wisps of cirrus; and he saw in that light Hugh, groggy and heavy-lidded, sit up in his bedroll, and collapse again with a groan. He floundered in his own blankets. When he stood up, they fell all around him. Wafer gathered them up, and stood up in the chill with them wrapped tight around his shoulders, like vestments. And he turned his back on the fire to warm it. The heat rose up the blanket and eased his cold.

He faced the dead bodies of the pigs on the rack. A dark man there, runs a finger down the curing flesh that will this day be borne home. A pale bearded man in a swallowtail coat and a boiled shirt. Wafer moved to see who that might be, but the man held up his hand. He said:

—I will pour them out like water.

and he did not smile. He cautioned merely, a thing that was holy enough. And turned and stepped away and was gone instantly, into the woods.

A voice asked:

—Who was it you was like to call out to?

—and Wafer turned and gestured self-consciously. He rubbed his eyes, and said:

—I guess no one.

—and Hugh watched this with his blue eyes rheumy and bloodshot. He looked awful; he drooled a little, and wiped at his mouth as he spoke. His eyes were flat as glass, speculative and transparent. The pain in them is choked to throttling; whoever he was, was hidden.

He said, —Come along down the crik. We'll fetch some water.

And Wafer said, —Alright.

* * *

One Wednesday, not long after the pig hunt, the creek behind the church ran full from the autumn rains. In it, a wide pocket of green water, backed into an eddy by a still pool. The sky was there, blue and rippling on the surface. At the edge of the pool, a man was supported between two deacons. He slumped between them; his eyes rolled up in his head. A torrent of words, words seeming nonsense, rushed out of him; his tongue thick in his mouth, his eyes popped out; he sagged between them. His eyes gazed into some other place entirely. In the green pool the preacher stood waiting, wet and altogether under water to the waist. The congregation swooned around them. The swooning man was answered by his listeners in kind. All of them together mouthing strange words bafflingly like what you might know, but not like. The deacons led him forward to the water's edge. The congregation swayed and shouted, shouted and swayed—

—*Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?*

and the man was in the water in a medley of shouts and cries. The deacons walked him to the

preacher. Brother Earl stood with the man in the water, supporting him. The swooning man swayed like a reed. The preacher held one hand on his shoulder, the other in the small of his back. The deacons left the water. Brother Earl and the new convert were two great rawboned farmers tanned to leather. They staggered in the water, shivered in the chill, and incoherently prayed—the preacher had the man's head in both hands now, as if like to kiss him. The preacher turned to the side. Placed a hand a second time to the man's face, and another to his back. He pinched the man's nose shut.

And toppled him backward, down to the water's embrace. And raised him back up dripping. All the while praying, praying, never a stop. Wafer's mother watched Earl avidly, nursing a small, secret smile. And Wafer watched his mother. And brother Earl put the man underwater twice more. Hymns of joy echoed in the small green vernal place. And also, a copperhead slid noiselessly from bush to bush at the far bank, while the congregation sang happily —

—Blessed Redeemer
Jesus is mine!
Oh what a foretaste.
of glory divine—.

and if it watched at all, it did so with its reptile brain aglitter in obsidian eyes. And water dripped like tears from brother Earl's glistening skull.

* * *

It was the Thanksgiving of his fourteenth year, and they were all gathered at Wafer's house; and the tables groaned under the weight of the food. They were set up outside, plank-and-trestle contraptions, got up for the occasion. Wafer and Junior and Hugh and several other cousins hauled water, for what seemed like forever itself. The tank in his mother's kitchen was

larger than the one Emma and Jeff owned; larger than any they knew anything about, since they bought it the year after Wafer came; but the demands made upon it this day were also very great.

There were other uncles and aunts, there were what seemed an endless, shifting pack of cousins. There were two whitehaired grandmothers, and the third with her grandfather silent, and drooling now and then, but still intact, more-or-less: as great a gathering as this clan had seen in quite some while. All under the benign offices of Waylon Roberts. Brother Earl was there, too, at the insistence of Wafer's mother.

The week before, Wafer's mother had been in absolute tizzy. Monday she lectured Hattie at length on what would be expected of her. Hattie listened to her, and then she said:

—I can't do it.

and Wafer's mother repeated the same lecture over again, almost verbatim, Wafer sitting at the breakfast table slowing spooning oatmeal into his mouth, and wide-eyed watching, listening. His eyes moved back and forth between the two women, like the dark and the light of one another. And Hattie said:

—I can't do it.

and Wafer's mother said to Hattie impatiently, much as she had already said twice before, although also so much briefer:

—*I* can't do Thanksgivin without you. You and Ward both. It's like Waylon showin he's made good at last. That's why it's so important that we have it *here*, and everythin has got to be perfect. Absolutely perfect. And I've got to have both of you to do it.

—I can't do it, Hattie said.

—Oh my God, Wafer's mother said.

There was cooking to do, to be sure. There would be many dishes to wash. Avis, as it turned out, was not available for the holiday, either. This sudden revolt of the darkies was much to the chagrin of Wafer's mother. Hattie and Ward were immovable, however; they would be there in the coming week, as usual; neither would be there on Thanksgiving Day. Wafer's mother remained in a very great state of excitement, for a very long while. The excitement over Hattie and Ward and Avis had gone on all the week, and no one seemed prepared to yield, until Hattie's determination to spend the holidays with her own children and grandchildren prevailed at last, but only by the slimmest margin. And a last-minute scramble, when Hattie found a substitute. A dour, wordless woman named Rhetta, and her daughter Loreena, who labored now stolidly in the Roberts kitchen, while Wafer's mother flitted back and forth and badgered both of them endlessly.

But until all of that, Wafer had never realized that Avis was Hattie's sister. As if Hattie and Ward could exist at all, and still have no family of their own. And the realization shocked him. And it shocked him that he was shocked.

—I didn't come noplace to haul water like I was to home, muttered Hugh.

Junior scowled. He was the oldest.

—This is one damn fine holiday, said Hugh. We're s'pose to be *guests*.

—You better watch that cussin, said Junior.

—I'm totin it, too, said Wafer. All three plodded from well to kitchen, well to kitchen. Wafer said, —Ya'll just hush up and haul.

Hugh put down his two pails and rubbed his hands. His hands were scored with two vivid red welts. He spat in his dry flakey palm and rubbed his hands savagely together.

—We got it to do, said Wafer. Let's do it.

—Wafer is a waif, said Hugh mockingly.

Wafer stopped and looked at him. —What do you mean?

—You ain't even a Sweet. Hell, you ain't even a Roberts. You ought to haul it all. Where's them niggers of yours? They fetch and carry for you all the time. Your Daddy bought a store, didn't he? Now he can cheat all the niggers and the white folks, too, and lord it up at exactly the same time. *Hell* of a accomplishment. Buy him one of them white suits next, I bet. But where are all them niggers today? Is what I'd like to know.

Wafer said, —Ya'll work them, too. They work to your place.

—They all workin for you now.

Wafer stood silently with the water in the buckets in his hands and finally, he said, —I guess they're off to their own Thanksgivings.

—Did your Daddy tell them to stay?

—Mama deals with them. They said they was goin to their childrens.

Hugh spat. He rubbed his hands on his hips. —Nigger talked back to me, I'd learn him.

Junior smacked Hugh on the head with his open palm. Hugh's open mouth popped with the blow. He pushed Hugh at the shoulder. There was a warning in his eyes. He said, —Get on about it. And shut up.

Hugh stood and glared at his brother. But hefted his pails, and staggered with them onward. Wafer kept waiting for Junior or Hugh to say more, but neither did. The three finished the water, and that done sufficient for the moment, they joined their other cousins in a mixed game of stickball, in the open field beyond the house. The barn was the backstop. Hugh pitched

to both teams. A mute gallery of prickly pear and mesquite watched the game. Wafer came up to bat. Hugh pitched the ball, but Wafer didn't swing. The ball bounced off the wall of the barn and lay in the dust.

—That was a strike, said Hugh.

Wafer prodded with his toe the leather wad of a ball, while a girl cousin catching—Mindy? —scooped it up, and chucked it back to Hugh. Wafer said, —We don't play with strikes.

Hugh caught the ball and stood with one hand planted on his hip. He said, —Well, *hell*. How do you figure that?

Everyone gasped when Hugh said *hell*.

—It's how we've always played, said Wafer. And you know it. We don't call a strike unless we got close to fuller teams than this. Wafer gestured. We ain't got but four to a side and you pitchin.

—That's a bad rule, said Hugh. Four to a side is plenty.

—Well maybeso, said Wafer, but we ain't talked at all about changin it.

Junior said from second base, —Good God, Hugh, shut the hell up about it and get on with the game.

The two or three girl cousins squealed again all together at the word *hell*, and Junior blushed.

—Well ain't you all growdy, Hugh answered Junior. He was smiling, delighted at Junior's embarassment. —Mama hear you say that, you're apt to have you a whole big mouth full of lye.

—So who's gonna tell her? Junior lowered. He stood bent over with his hand on his knees, and Wafer stood at the plate swinging his stick back and forth waiting for Hugh to pitch, while Hugh said:

—You're gonna be in trouble.

and Junior said:

—You said it yourself not a minute past.

and everyone else stood waiting. Wafer stood with his stick, knocking with it steadily on the heels of his bare feet, raising first one and then the other. Finally Wafer asked loudly, twirling his stick in a circle with one hand, —Are we playin with strikes? Or not?

—Hell yes we are, said Hugh.

—There you go again, said Junior.

—Fine, let's play with strikes, said Wafer. He pointed at Hugh with his stick.

—Hugh, he said. Throw the ball.

Hugh turned to Wafer and stared for a moment, tossing the ball as though he juggled it, his hand moving beneath the airborne ball, as though on a whim he might decide not to catch it. He said to Wafer, —Why sure enough. *Cousin*.

The ball smacked Wafer hard in the shoulder, and only that because he moved to avoid being hit in the face. He grimaced with the pain. He stood rubbing his shoulder a moment, then bent down and picked up the ball, and lobbed it to Hugh laconically, while dropping his stick by the square wooden plate with an air of decisiveness.

He said, —I don't believe I want to play no more.

Junior snorted impatiently. Mindy, still at catcher, asked puzzledly as Wafer walked

away, —Why is he always so mean to you?

Wafer sighed but didn't answer. He walked toward the house. So did some of the others. Hugh stood on the mound, juggling the ball as before. Some of the other cousins milled confusedly around the field. Hugh said smiling at Wafer's retreating back.

—Quittin? he said. That ain't *hardly* like a Roberts.

Junior scowled at him fiercely. Everyone was moving toward the house.

* * *

That evening everyone sat at table. The boys at a smaller table, and the girls at another small table, and the grownups at the big table, and all three tables were warm yellow globes of light in the dusk, from the lamps burning in the trees above. Candles burned to keep away the bugs. The tables were sited for the evening breeze. It sluiced down upon them, along the same line as the former dogtrot, which Waylon Roberts had recently enclosed to add yet another room to his house, along with a gallery hallway for ease of access. There was siding over most of the logs now. The breeze carried the odor of the cooking the new nigger woman had been up to back of the cabin, in what was usually Hattie's kitchen. There was food fetched by his aunt Emma and the other women, too.

Wafer's father said grace, and they all fell to eating. Turkey, whitefleshed and moist, with corn stuffing, served all around; there was ham and fried chicken and grilled chops; there were tomatoes and sliced cucumber and snap beans with hamhock; squash and sweet pickles and chow-chow and red beets; steak and roast and prairie hens shot in the grasses of the Keechi. There were biscuits and cornbread and rolls; and also pies and cobbler and cakes, all cooling on the sideboard.

—So they had their little meetin in Cleburne, Wafer's father said. And what's to come of that? Not so many of them now, huh? His eyes flickered bemusedly to Jeff, and then away.

—It's the People's Party, said his uncle. The Alliance is the grassroots but the People's Party is the political wing, see? Maybe lots to come of it.

—Did you see where Daddy got us a new hound? said Junior to Wafer.

—I know what a damn Populist is, growled Wafer's father. And I know all that business around the subtreasury and money supply, too, so don't you patronize me. I been a democrat all my life.

—So have I, Waylon.

—You ain't doin so bad, Jeff. You got a fine house out of finished lumber. Me and Ola here is still livin in my Daddy's old cabin. But we got plenty to eat.

—Your Daddy's old cabin in a new suit of clothes, said Jeff. He added, —All I'm after is justice, Waylon. That ain't too much to ask.

Waylon snorted. —You'll have just as much as you can buy. You find it some other way than that, you let me know about it. That will be a big event.

—A man's entitled to a fair profit on his labor.

—I don't need much, Waylon said. I got most all what I need. I sure don't want nothin from no Reds.

—I ain't a Red and you know it, Jeff snapped. The suppliers and the factors and the bankers and the railroads most of all, they gouge each and every one of us all they can, every time we get a crop laid by. We can't win. It's unjust, it is.

—They's a lot that is, ain't there?

—He's gonna hunt her when it cools a mite more, said Junior. They figure she'll lead the pack, she's that good. We're goin to hunt up a coon to try her. My Daddy said so. A bunch of us all together. Sometime before the pig hunt this year.

—We do that all the time, said Hugh. We eat coon all the time.

—*Wafer* ain't been, said Junior. And they's the new hound, too, see?

—Robertses and Sweets, said Hugh. He looked blazingly at Wafer. Wafer stared at him with turkey and dressing forgotten in his mouth. At the adult table, Wafer heard his father say in an angry tone, —*Your* peoples wasn't. *Your* peoples come here after the war, from Illinois, and they wasn't no copperheads, neither, that I ever heard.

—Wha'd I say? Asked Hugh. All the kids either stared openly, or exchanged bewildered looks with one another, and Hugh and Wafer sayt with their eyes locked. Hugh was smiling. At the grownup table, Wafer saw Hugh's and Junior's grandparents turn away as another old man tried to calm Waylon and Jeff. The old people blushed with embarassment, the younger looked everywhere except at the two combatants, but Jeff and Waylon only argued the more loudly.

—You shut up, Hugh, Junior said. His voice actually trembled. —You shut up *now*.

—What *are* you sayin, Hugh? Wafer's mother suddenly held Hugh squirming in her gaze. She had turned around and leaned over the back of her chair, a pretty woman, still young, with bright green eyes, staring fixedly at Hugh.

—I ain't sayin nothin, Aunt Ola, Hugh muttered. His eyes dropped to his lap.

—All that's past, Waylon, said Uncle Jeff. It's a depression now. Common folk got to stick together. All them rich Yankees got money and power and possessions, and we got nothin at all, nothin but cotton and niggers. It won't even pay us to make a crop.

Hugh sat silent in the eyes of Wafer's mother. Wafer's mother held the boy mute with her eyes. Wafer's Aunt Emma, Hugh's mother, reached out, laid a hand on Ola's arm. Ola's head jerked, she turned, and Emma and Ola, sisters, held one another in a long, quiet gaze of their own.

—Now how is the coinage of silver supposed to change all that? Waylon asked.

—By increasin the money supply, Jeff answered.

Aunt Emma said, —You, boy. Hugh. Eat your supper.

—A bank controllin the money supply is a fox in the henhouse, and that's for sure, said Uncle Jeff. He looked at Waylon curiously. —You join the White Man's League, Waylon? Or some other organization? You seem just excitable here lately. You sleepin nights? Or are you running the country, scarin niggers?

Hugh said, —Yes'm

—I don't see what that has to do with the price of cotton, *Jeff*. Waylon's voice was near shouting. Jeff answered quietly, —We farm a crop that just won't pay. It especially won't pay, if you're farmin someone else's land. And buyin in his store, and—.

—And that's mostly *niggers*, Waylon said, in an even louder voice. He said it as if he had proved up a difficult point. And he wasn't finished; he went on, —Good God, Jeff. You always was too quick to take up for a nigger. I swear it's the Yankee in you.

—Waylon, said uncle Jeff. His voice even quieter than before. He drew a deep breath before he went. —Waylon, not every sharecropper that ever drew a breath is a nigger in the first place. He shook his head again, and went on, —Waylon, they won't no one hardly even *talk* any more with niggers. The democrats took free silver, made it their own, what with Bryan and all.

And now your White Man's League is drivin the last nails in the coffin, to say nothin of night ridin fools.

He stood up. He flung down his white linen napkin and it tented in a peak on the white linen tablecloth. He said passionately, —It's wrecked the People's Party. I admit it. We've lost. If we had the nigger vote and some of the white vote, we might stand a chance. But with only the niggers, and a few like me—. He put his face sideways. He stood staring down between his feet, at nothing in particular. He turned and walked away from the table and was seen no more that evening.

* * *

Wafer knew there were belts of timber, like fingers from a hand, hugging the creeks that twisted over the land like snakes. A few of these still flowed year-round, out of seep springs and freshets left over from earlier days. He knew there were cedar brakes up the ridges, and the cottonwood and pecan on the long greenbelt of the Trinity River's West Fork, and blackjack pine and live oak. The arms of the Brazos embraced the middle part of Texas, but the Trinity drained this land. Pockets of encroaching mesquite, and the ubiquitous prickly pear, the brakes of cedar, proliferated everywhere. Eroded banks marked land overgrazed and overfarmed. In the middle, the middling land of the Keechi Valley. That was the province Wafer hunted. He came to know it, in its totality, as a hunter. And he loved to hunt. The mixture in it, of pride and of shame, of the obscene and the sublime—not at all unlike the land itself—was an elixir to him.

He hunted with his father, and his cousins, and a new dog his cousins had—a hound with a slack face, and an enormous nose, wuffling in the dust constantly. At this late date, Wafer carried a .410. His father carried a gun called a Krag-Jorgensen. He said he'd got it off a man

who had got it off a man returned from the Spanish War, fifteen years before. Since Waylon and his son seldom ate what they shot, unless they cooked it fresh over a campfire, they usually gave their game to the Sweets. The Robertses had no longer had any need to bring home game. They hunted mostly for Wafer's father's sport, and only lately for Wafer's. They hunted in the day and in the night, depending on the game. This time it was night, and they hunted a coon, who'd developed a taste for eggs.

The trail led from chicken coop to a roost in a hollow tree, and the baying of the dogs flushed the coon out, and the chase was on. Junior and Wafer carried punk torches, unlit at first. The dogs took the scent. The howled, calling for blood—for these hunts, they were not leashed or muzzled, but let run free. Everyone in the hunting party—Wafer's father and his uncle Jeff and the boys—Wafer, Junior, Hugh—ran breakneck through the woods, following the dogs; the dogs trailed the spoor of the coon, howling at the moon's witness prophecies of bloody, imminent death. The chase was the longest part of the hunt, a trial and an ordeal and a fever-pitch of excitement, that could stretch through the night. In the wee hours came a time when the tone of the baying changed, grew deeper but also more excited, and by that they knew the hounds—by then quite distant from the slower boys and men—had treed their quarry. They guided in on the howling of dogs. It was late, it was cold, and by then it was the dark of the moon. They came to a grove of blackjack oak, on Lost Creek, a few miles above old Fort Richardson.

—How we gonna bring it down? asked Hugh.

—If we shoot it without killing it, it could run off in the brush, said Jeff.

The hounds all were yelping and whining in a clot at the tree's bole, simple in their lust.

It was a post oak, largish. The hounds couldn't get up it, though they leaped and scrabbled and hung like dangling fools by their claws, just for mere seconds. Junior and Wafer lit the torches. The coon was on a branch, staring down at them with black eyes. The eyes caught and held the yellow flames of the torches. Twin small flames came back from the dark of the tree, where the coon huddled at the fork of a branch.

—And then we'd have it to track all over, said Waylon, and maybe get it or maybe not.

—So how we gonna get it? Hugh asked again.

—Someone's gonna have to climb up there. Knock it down to the dogs.

Waylon handed Wafer first his Krag, and then his coat. Wafer and Hugh went to opposite sides, and held up their torches as high as they could, for light. Junior and uncle Jeff worked the dogs, calming them to a waiting huddle. Waylon went up the tree in a scrabble. The light of the torches flickered weirdly; shadows of the branches moving with the flames. The coon was still crouched near the bole of the tree, on a wide branch, opposite the side where Waylon climbed; but as Waylon approached, it scurried further out, to a new fork. It waited there, draped across the fork like an old coat, watching with its black eyes from its black mask, now its teeth showing. The warning snarls were in a chilling treble note.

Waylon reached the bole of the tree, stepped around it, and without pausing went out on the branch. He had a stick gripped like a club in one hand. In his teeth he had a hunting knife, an old Bowie someone had carried years ago to Indian battles, the Civil War, maybe the Spanish War, or even all three, and kept in a dark leather scabbard with a brass tip and a brass lip, oiled and sharp, still blazoned "CS," the "C" stamped over an older "U." The others, Wafer among them, ranged around the bottom of the tree, the hounds still lurching up in the air in spurts and

startles, crazy baying. Jeff Rupert slashed them with a strap, and snarled them down again to a moiling, snorting calm.

Wafer watched while his father moved toward the coon. The coon rared and hissed. Waylon poked it with the stick. Jeff Rupert watched, jittering on his feet, waving his arms to distract the coon while he shouted:

—Waylon! Don't you let that thing get aholt you—

when Waylon smashed with his club at one paw gripping the branch, and the coon jerked it back like a scalded cat, and cried weirdly in a child's voice, and started to advance openmouthed toward Waylon. Waylon tucked his club under one arm. He took up his knife, and slashed with it. The coon scuttled backward. Waylon advanced. The coon curled up before him on a bleeding shoulder wound, with a cry of pain that ripped Wafer's heart. The coon rocked back and forth, curled on itself, as a man might be who has smashed his thumb with a hammer, still emitting its weird, harsh cry. Waylon slashed again with his knife. He quickly swapped to the club as the coon curled upside down on the branch, moaning horribly. Waylon bashed with the club at the coon's forelegs. It almost fell, gripped the branch still harder, mouth opened wide as it panted, eyes locked on Waylon. Who hit it with the club again, wherever he could reach. Again and again and again.

The coon tumbled down from the tree. It cried as it fell, a terrible suffering shriek, but after that, never made another sound. Because the hounds fell on it, baying and slashing. Their fur agleam with condensation, and the air afog with their fast breath. Jeff Rupert's new hound jerked back her head and snapped once, twice, at a long ribbon of coon gut that flew bloodily from her mouth. Another hound whipped its head in a perfect fog of blood; a patch of some

shredded, nameless offal dangled from its dripping flews. All the dog's muzzles in the torchlight black with coon blood. Waylon was climbing down out of the tree. Uncle Jeff Rupert was beating off the hounds, before they altogether ruined the meat. He used a stick. He flailed at the dogs, shouting:

—Get back! Get back, you bastards!

and Waylon shouted from the tree,

—Jeff, you ain't gonna eat that?

—Sure I am.

and Wafer's father, coming down out of the tree:

—Jeff, you eat coon like a nigger.

and uncle Jeff Rupert stared up at him and said:

—I like game meats.

Wafer's Daddy, laughing all the way down the tree, said:

—Coon like a nigger.

and laughed some more.

—Whyn't they just shoot it? Wafer muttered. That got him a snort from Hugh and a long, strange look from Junior. The dogs yapped and milled. Wafer looked at the coon gut—there was lots of it, one chunk curled on a yellowish leaf like a strange, bloody stool—and it all glistened redly in the torchlight. He scried no future, read no scripture, divined no thing but death therein. To drag all, and himself alike, forward through time, or sideways into vision; and the sky smeared pink where the sun rose on all alike. Nowhere now but where he was, his own blood roaring in his ears. He left lay the sweet red glisten, where it glowed like witchfire. His

family did not eat the coon. But Jeff Rupert's did.

* * *

In the spring of Wafer's seventeenth year, in the second year of a distant war they'd begun to hear of lately, his cousins Junior and Hugh came to him a Friday evening, and asked his help the next day taking a coyote. This coyote had a taste for chickens. It was in the wane of the school year, though all three boys had pretty well quit going. Their chores were done. They stood in a Spring dusk, cool and damp with recent rains, talking. The green of the year had the valley abloom. Not autumn's chill, nor summer's killing heat. The best time of year.

—How do you expect to do that? Wafer asked. Do you know where it holds up?

Junior said, —We think we do. We think he's up around the graves on your ridge.

—The Indian graves?

—Yep.

—He?

—All the worse if a she, said Hugh. He spat; said with some force, —There *is* the bounty to split. You want in or not?

Junior said, —The damn beast took four hens in as many days. And we ain't so much as seen him.

—Let them roost in the trees, said Wafer.

—He takes them anyhow, said Junior. He gestured down the road toward the Sweet place. He went on, —I'll be damned if I know how he does it, but he does. We trailed him as far as the top of that razorback ridge, here on your place. Your Daddy let you help us?

Wafer mused, —How the hell can he take them out of a tree?

—Damn, Wafer. I don't know. But we can't go on supplyin chicken to them, we just can't. Are you goin to help us or ain't you?

—And anyway, said Hugh. He winked. We'll serve refreshments.

* * *

That morning it was wet. They met between breakfast and noon in the lee of the hill that sheltered the Sweet house. Wafer and Junior carried water, in flat cavalry canteens. They brought along a single dog—Missy—and two short shovels to dig out the den with, lashed on a frame on Junior's back. They were also prepared to burn out or smoke out whatever the beast; or to do whatever else it would take to do away with the chicken thief. Wafer walked past the back door, where his aunt Emma Sweet stood speechlessly watching. They greeted one another and bid farewell without speaking; mother and sons the same. The boys knew already the old trail the marauder had left; they hoped that morning for a new fresh one.

They found it. The muzzled dog wuffled in the yard by the chewed boards of the henhouse. Feathers caught on the splinters of wood. The dog jerked at her traces, taken up by the scent. She pulled them past the barn, where uncle Jeff Rupert tended the screw worm on one of his cows. Others were penned in the lot. The cow lowed fiercely, and rattled the boards in the stall where it was boxed, and the air reeked of kerosene and cowshit. Jeff Rupert, too, watched Wafer and the others pass, without a word. They passed by the fenced garden. They passed by the stock tank.

The dog sniffed with increasing excitement. She brought them to a new scatter of bloody feathers, in a shallow wash downslope of the barn; she fought her muzzle, and she fought the leash. She took off at a run, dragging Junior stifflegged after, through the fence and plunging

down the bank beyond the wash, and into a scut of low brush. Thence down a second wash into the creekbed, up a cutback in the crumbling bank, scrabbling in a cloud of white dust through the culvert of a wood bridge, and out at last into the road. The road stretched off both ways into seeming nothing. A ribbon of bare naked dirt just dried up from mud. It was rutted with the petrified tracks of truck and wagon wheels.

They scrambled across bridge and road. Great hunks of dried mud broke off as they brushed past, already giving off a new reddish color and sharp iron flavor of dust. In the bar ditch they trod fresher mud and came to the fence. Hugh stretched the fence wires apart with hands and booted feet, his fingers splayed to miss the barbs, while first Junior and the dog went through, then Wafer to hold the wires for Hugh, and finally Hugh. Junior and the dog were long gone. Wafer and Hugh plunged into the cedar brake, through that and up the ridge, the dog ahead of them snuffling and chomping in its muzzle, crazy to howl, but not able, hacking at repeated attempts to give a full throat to her bloodlust. Hugh and Wafer hit a steady rhythm, struggling to keep up. Hugh carried a rucksack, that swung with the rhythm of his stride, banging on his hip. The dog struggled still to sound a note, and managed at last to keen shrilly in her muzzle. The grade steepened. They all four toiled up the slope of the ridge.

—Well she damn sure picked up on somethin, Hugh panted.

—They put in their burrows on a slope, said Wafer. I read about it. But this seems to go awful high. You say you tracked it to the top?

—Hold up that dog for a minute, Goddammit! shouted Hugh to Junior.

Booming up the slope into the scrub oak, climbing the ridge. Hugh carried Wafer's old .410, loaded with buck., and Wafer carried his Daddy's old Krag. They finally stopped for a rest,

squatting by a huge, castellated mass of prickly pear, crowned all about it with fruit, topped in turn by cupped pink and yellow flowers. The grasslands were abloom in the cool damp, with Indian paintbrush and tiny white crocuses and bluebonnets still unwilted by the heat that would come later, and hundreds of other kinds of flowers. Junior carried a .22 slung on his shoulder by a rope, while the dog wuffled at the ground under a tree, and tugged impatiently on her leash. They were all winded.

—How much further on you reckon it is? asked Hugh.

—No way to tell, said Junior.

—Well. Here's a little somethin to tide us up the hill.

Hugh fished a flat bottle out of his rucksack. They passed it around in silence, one swig each, and Wafer struggled not to cough at the fiery stuff as he drank it; nor did he ask its source. The dog pitched on the end of her rope, dragging Junior onward. They all set out again, and went on for some minutes at a steady pace. They topped the crest suddenly, and the dog scrabbled there at a ground-level gap between a sandstone boulder and a washed trough of gravel hard by it. She scrabbled and scratched and made a low choking noise, trying once again to bay into her muzzle. Wafer and Junior and Hugh stood looking at the land beyond the razorback ridge, breathing heavily. The land was an uneven checkerboard of plowed fields and open prairie, the fencelines running survey straight, and a far ridge with the same sequence of scrub and oak up its slope, and fingers of red cedar in the washes, and dwarf oak up to the crest. Here and there a section just beginning to be blighted with mesquite.

They turned then to the rock opening. When Wafer put his nose to it, the musk was unmistakable. They cast about aimlessly for a next step, taking a second pull at Hugh's bottle.

They rattled a long stick around in the hole, but they got nothing that way but their own noise. The opening was beneath a flat, rust-colored boulder, huge, with its tail bedded in the earth; as if it were a bone of the ridge, thrusting out through a wound. Ripples tracked in the dirt down its side from flowing water—once it had lain some deeper in the earth than it did now. Junior tied the dog off to a tree, where she sat and scratched at the muzzle with her forepaws, whining in frustration.

—Why'd you put on the damn muzzle? Wafer asked.

—Keep her from bayin it up, Hugh answered. Keep it from runnin away.

—Is it goin to run when it's denned, you think?

—Well. Maybe. Here's the den, at any rate, Hugh answered. He handed around his bottle. They dug into the mouth of the den with the shovels, loosening the dirt around the rock. Hugh found the deadfall trunk of a post oak, middling large, and carefully stacked up rocks for a fulcrum. They worked the lever from point to point of the rock, to loosen it. Junior and Hugh on the end; Wafer steadying the lever at its contact with the somewhat unsteady fulcrum. Much to their surprise, when they leaned on it, the big sandstone boulder shifted inchwise, coming visibly out of its bed.

—Get one under it! shouted Hugh. Wafer scrambled to scotch the boulder with a small stone. They repositioned their ad hoc machinery, and worked it again. They shifted and shifted just so, four times, and five, until they had raised the stone a foot or so, and shifted it sideways at least that much again.

—That's a big damn rock, said Hugh.

A gray snout poked from under the rock, yapped once, and just as fast, withdrew. All

three were fumbling with their weapons. Junior popped off a .22. Small sharp crack in the stillness. It puffed in the dust harmlessly, just within the opening into the den. Neither Hugh nor Wafer fired, but they scrambled all three, aflush with excitement, to reposition the jack, and once again lift up the great flat stone. It was up two or so feet now, from where it had lain for who knew how long. There were snarls and growls from underneath.

—Here, said Hugh. He dug again in his knapsack, and handed around a new bottle. Everyone drank again.

—What the hell is that? Wafer asked while he drank. I thought we'd drunk it all.

—We are about half drunk, said Junior.

—It's 'shine, Hugh replied. Got two bottles off a nigger, down on the river. Hugh pointed to the boulder's side, where it teetered on the beam. He said, —Put in some rocks right there. Let's shift her again.

Booted as it was in its ageless bed, the boulder had not seemed as huge as it did now; but they had the measure of it, or thought they did. They had enough confidence to proceed, at least. They moved the lever to the far side, where Hugh had indicated, and lifted it twice more. They moved to a new spot, and lifted it again, and a second, and a third time. It looked now as though it would topple right over, with the next least push. The three boys peered narrowly at the shadowed space underneath. Wafer hacked and spat and blinked the dust from his eyes. They all drank again from Hugh's bottle. It was a bigger bottle than the first, but now it burned very little going down.

—I think it doglegs, said Junior. They's a pit under there where the burrow is.

—One more good push, and over she goes, said Hugh.

They decided that Hugh and Wafer would stand back with .410 and Krag, while Junior levered the rock its last inch or two, and toppled it. They shared the last of the ‘shine, and Hugh flung both bottles downslope, where they shattered. Two sprays of glass bloomed a brief glitter in the reddened light.

—Look how late it is, said Wafer.

—You boys ready? asked Junior.

Junior lay over on the pole. It bent in the middle, but held. Junior used its springiness to bobble the stone, where it teetered sideways on the columns of unsteady rock piled under it, until it slewed out of the hole that was its own shape more suddenly than seemed possible, and amid the tumble of the fragile rock props that had briefly braced it, the hill itself gave a definite shake when the big rock struck down. Wafer and Hugh threw down with rifle and shotgun. The dust was thick, but they saw the coyote, curled up tightly in a hole not much larger than itself, and they both fired, and reloaded, and fired again very quickly, while the coyote convulsed a last dance in its hole. It never made a sound, but bled out in the twitch and ripple of its dying. They had fired three times before they saw that there were actually two coyotes, and pups.

They had both died almost instantly, they lay so close together in the flail of gunfire; and the blood was a black pool in the hole. They saw the hanging dugs of the bitch, and the pups squirming in the spray of warm blood pooling and congealing, and the male off to the side, whose sharp fox muzzle twitched and his lip curled as he died, exposing the sawtooth canine teeth. Two of the four pups were somehow still alive. Wafer stood with his Krag; he checked the breech, but didn’t reload it. Hugh reloaded the .410, stepped over the open hole, and fired downward at the squirming pups. They vanished in a cone of birdshot. He reloaded quickly and

fired again, and only then did they hear Junior crying out.

—Looka here, looka here, Junior said. Good Godamighty, boys, looka here what we got now.

Offset slightly from the coyote burrow, another cavity opened under the rock. There were scraps of red and blue cloth in it, still bright. There was in the waning sunlight a wink of brass buttons. There were shards of wood, the metal tips of arrows, what appeared to be an old style flintlock pistol, potsherds, neatly strung beading. Two staring holes where eyes had been. And teeth that grinned. And the graceful curve of rib bones, collapsed into dust at either side of a neat row of vertebrae. Upjut of pelvis. Long bones of the legs. Two longish feathers, white and black, in two long hanks of braided hair that lay beneath the rib bones.

—I be go to hell, said Wafer.

Hugh turned to his brother. —You got that other bottle? he asked.

Wafer opened his canteen, and took a slow sip of water. He felt sick, and a little ashamed, as he always felt after a hunt. Only this time moreso. The bizarre combination of the turmoil in his stomach, the euphoria of the ‘shine, and the kill together, with the new disquiet of the human remains laid out so ceremoniously before him, made him silent, and made him step back. He gazed at where the sun turned the sky red. He wanted to put the rock back, and leave the coyotes and the rest where they were. He took a second slow swallow of water, as Hugh proffered his third bottle, saying:

—Have some of this. Make a man of you.

and Hugh belched fragrantly and turned his back, and trod right through the bones across to Junior, where he took up Junior’s canteen.

—We'll be after dark gettin home, Wafer said. He said it so quietly, he couldn't know if either one had heard him. He stood, and walked around the gravesite, and gave Hugh the bottle. Junior and Hugh sat next to one another, their feet half-into the burrow and its burden of bloodied dogs, and passed the bottle back and forth. There was blood on the toes of Junior's brogans, a bigger spot on the cuff of Hugh's pants. They drank rapidly. More blood found its way onto them. Hugh took up the coyote male and the bitch by the neck scruff, one to each hand, and dragged them from the burrow. He walked to a tree, and hung them from it one at a time. It left a bloody trail. He impaled both by the underjaws on sharp stobs; it made a wet chucking sound when he did it, that made Wafer cringe. The legs dangled, obscenely slack. Hugh was cleaning his hands of blood with dust. The mouths and the wounds of the coyotes slowly leaked more blood. Hugh returned to Junior, at the grave. The two had already come very close to finishing the bottle they shared. Wafer sat on what had been both gravestone, and roof of the coyote den, where it lay near a ledge formed of the same rust-red sandstone. The ledge looked out across the valley beyond the ridge. Wafer stared across. Hugh watched him.

—Hey. Do you never wonder? said Hugh at last.

Hugh climbed out of the grave, carrying a bone. He used it to scratch his back. He looked at Wafer blearily, and Wafer looked stonily back, while Junior could be seen to rummage further in the opened grave. Wafer said finally, —Wonder what?

—What sort of Indians these was. Hugh swung his bone by way of emphasis. It looked like an arm bone. —You talked a lot to old man Raupe, before he died, Hugh went on. What'd he say about it?

—Probably Comanch, I guess, Wafer answered. Wichitas and Caddoes was here, too, in

olden days. Even Cherokee a bit more South.

—Comanch whipped them all, didn't they?

—So they say.

—I can whip you.

—What?

—Nothin, nothin. He waved both his hands in the air, as if rubbing out or shaking away all he had just said.

—Hey, he said. Hey. Your momma ever tell you about your birthin? Ever?

Wafer's eyes lit. He said tightly, —Shut up.

—My mamma tells me all the time about mine.

— Shut up anyway.

—I can whip you. So why *don't* your mama ever tell you?

—All right. You can whip me. I admit it. Now shut up.

Junior stood up in the hole of the rock, that was now known to be a sort of double grave, doubly violated. He was dusty. His pantlegs from the knee down were almost uniformly black with coyote blood. He was tossing something up and down like a ball in one hand, swinging something like a bat in the other. He scrambled onto the shingle of scattered dirt and stones, the debris of their late exertions. Freshly turned earth, dark and moist, scattered at his step. He tossed the skull up in the air, gripped the femur by its small end, and swung. He missed. The skull fell in the dirt and bounced several times, rolling to a stop. Junior strode in one lurching step back across the grave.

Hugh held Wafer in his eye. Wafer looked cornered. Hugh said, —You know, don't

you?

Wafer looked away. —I know we need to start back.

— You *do* know, God damn it, don't you? That your Daddy ain't your Daddy.

Wafer didn't move. He heard Junior call out behind them, puffing back up the rise by the gravesite, redfaced and winded, —Ya'll watch this. *Watch* now.

—You ain't *no one's* son, said Hugh. Triumph in his voice. His face tragic.

—Shut up.

—A *bastard*. He snarled the last word.

—Shut up. Please.

—You're a bastard, that's what. Hugh was crying and trying to hide it.

—Shut up.

—They fight about it all the time, did you know that? I hear them at night. Fightin over you. Over how much attention he pays to you, even if he did give you up. Over money he gives your daddy. Your *keeper*—.

Hugh slung away his bottle. He snuffled the snot that ran with his tears. Wafer stood silent, but his lips shaped the words: —Shut up—. —Shut *up*—. They faced one another, across the scut of turned earth. Cornered at last, Wafer found little left to say.

Hugh cried out, —We're *brothers*, you dumb son of a bitch.

There was a sharp crack, and the Indian's skull sailed away down the slope, where it hit and bounced, rolling past trees and rocks and clumps of prickly pear aflower in yellows and pinks in the dusk, the blooms just beginning to close. Junior whooped and swung the leg bone wildly. Hugh was ever more openly weeping. He cried out, —You ain't *no one's* son.

Junior stopped jumping up and down and turned to look at Hugh and Wafer. He swung the bone weakly; dust powdered into the grave from his questing feet, small mounds piling up in the thickening blood. Junior said weakly, —You reckon we can get the bounty on these pups?

A new quality entered Hugh's voice when he spoke again. He said in a hiss:

—We got the same Daddy, you and me. All three of us. All the blue-eyed three of us, how do you like that? And my but don't you tan easy, Mr. Wafer. You don't even need no sun. You look just like a damn meskin, ever summer. Every winter, fall, spring, too. *Bastard*.

He said his last words in a spray of spittle.

—But you're a *bastard*. My Daddy got you on a meskin whore in Fort Worth, and you're a *bastard* and you always will be, a greasy spic bastard.

—Why do you *say* that? Wafer cried at last. And still more weakly:

—How *can* you say that?

—Ask *him*, Hugh blubbered. He gestured loosely at Junior. His face transformed two times, three, as he fought for control. And shouted, —Go on! *Ask* him. Just see what he says.

For Wafer, it was as if the nerves that controlled the muscles of his face had been surgically severed. Inside he boiled like a pot. But held himself as still and close as he could. Time later to sort it out. Maybe. He stood staring at Junior, still not yet daring a word. His eyes pleaded the question. Junior stared down at the open grave, without speaking. He still held the nameless Indian's femur in one hand. The dog tugged against the rope that lashed her to a tree. She still made whining sounds into her muzzle. Junior neither stirred nor spoke, but the earth still moved, and the shadows lengthened.

—Tell him! Hugh cried. God *damn* it, tell him! Godamighty you great fat fool!

Junior threw the leg bone at Hugh. It missed.

Flinching, Hugh stumbled, and fell over, floundering against the overturned rock. A thin puke bubbled out of his mouth and down his chin. He fetched up against the rock, and rubbed with his forearm savagely at his face. He shouted, —You're a *bastard*. You ain't even got a name. Wafer *waif, that's* you!

—God, Hugh, Junior spoke at last. God. Why are you doin this?

—You're a liar! Wafer cried. He advanced on Hugh with his hands balled up into fists.

Hugh stood, filled now with a fierce joy, and spat out, —That what you think?

Wafer shouted, —You lie and you're *mean!*

And he swung his fist and Hugh twisted out of his way and came up beside and laid his own balled fist into Wafer's jaw, and Wafer shoved him roughly way, set himself turning, and advanced. They stood toe-to-toe, and pounded on one another. Grimly and without imagination, and absolutely without surrender. It seemed to go on for a long, long while, until they both stood glaring and panting, bleeding and sweat-soaked and dirty. Now it was dark. Wafer spat out blood.

He said to Junior, —Is it true?

But of course, he already knew. He had known forever.

PART TWO

1917

On the dusty block that served for a square at Perrin, Jeff Rupert Sweet, and his nephew, Wafer Roberts, came afoot from a tattered buggy lashed to the hitching post near Seth Warden's General Store. It was late in August, still summer, the time when crops are laid by. The schools had just begun to meet. Wafer carried a cardboard suitcase bound with twine. A man in a dusty black suit stood at the Humble gas pumps, waiting in front of Bettina's Café. A Model T truck, its engine turning sluggishly, waited with him. Its tailpipe leaked blue smoke. A load of country boys sprawled in the bed, waiting also. Wafer recognized them all—the Taliaferro boys, Jimmy Newman, Harold Ickes, and the other German boy, Otto Planck. Everyone called them Bosche and Kraut now, though they'd been mere squareheads, all the years before the war came, even to the faraway people they'd lately heard so much of, strange to them, who'd fought it already so long. They all nodded greetings, while Wafer slung his suitcase with a thud into the truckbed, and the dust jumped from it like a live thing. The others all had bags and cases of their own. They sprawled in rather expectation than repose. Wafer reached up a hand to the bed staves, and made to climb in. The man in the dusty black suit, Brett Stoat, checked his name off a clipboarded list. The leaves of paper ruffled in the wind. Stoat's long drooping moustache ruffled, too; it was speckled with the white caliche dust that blew off the road.

Jeff Rupert Sweet stayed Wafer with a hand. Said to him:

—Why you in so much a blind rush to die? I'd like to know, just to tell the young'uns, when they ask about you.

Wafer shrugged. He said, —I'd just as well go on. They'll come for me if I don't.

—They'd have to catch you.

The man in the black suit said, —We could do that, if we had to.

Suddenly there were people. They appeared abruptly in the street. More gathered on the curbless wooden sidewalks edging the dusty street. Before Jeff Rupert could respond, Stoat turned, and went inside the café. Wafer and Jeff Rupert stood at the truckbed, J.R. glaring the direction of Stoat's vanished back. The boys in the truckbed waited silently. Down the block, a clot of schoolkids exited the school enmasse. The school was a frame affair of clapboard, with perhaps four rooms, and the schoolkids, twenty or so of them, first to twelfth grades, moved toward the truck. Each one clutched in one hand a brand-new, handkerchief-sized American flag.

A clot of older men came out onto the sidewalk, too. In hats and jackets of faded gray they stood silently and apart. Of these, one gripped with both hands a Stars and Bars on a splintered pole. There were two others, younger, in blue uniforms of Cuba and the Phillipines; they stand together, their hands stuffed in their pockets. The schoolchildren lined up along the sidewalk; they played with their flags. Two women ushered them along.

—Jeff, said Wafer. It ain't a choice. I have to go. It's a war.

—Like any war, Jeff Rupert said. His voice is strange with passion, and he said it savagely, —You heard your old grandad talk about Virginia way more than often enough. You ought to know better than this.

—I never knew him, said Wafer. He died when I was little.

—Ain't you patriotic? Otto Planck asked suddenly from the truckbed. Ain't you?

Jeff turned on him, grateful for someone to vent on. —I ain't anxious for my relations to

die, he snapped. As he met Otto's gaze, his eyes blazed. He snarled, —No, nor much less to go off and kill them my own self, like you seem to be.

Otto looked like a man struck, but he said nothing more. Jeff still glared as Wafer said, —I still have to go and you know it. I can't shirk.

From the school came another, smaller group, this one all older boys. They were dressed in garish uniforms, and they, too, headed for the café. They carried their instruments. The brass trumpets and trombones winked in the sun, the promised remembrance of fourths of July, and Sousa and like airs. Tall and spare, almost skeletal, the music teacher wore a knotted string tie and a suit the color of ash. He walked beside them. He shepherded them, forming them up in the street. He hissed the stray blat of a horn promptly to embarrassed silence. He signaled them with a gesture to begin tuning. The new dissonance all the more strident.

—It ain't shirkin, said Jeff Rupert. It's good sense. These people ain't none of ours.

—It's all of our war, said the man in the black suit. He appeared at Wafer's elbow. He stood sipping fresh coffee from a paper cup. The coffee wet his moustache.

—All of our? Jeff Rupert's voice went edgy. He pointed at Stoat. —Yours.

He Gestured at Otto disgustedly. —*His*, maybe. Not mine.

—You interferin with me, Sweet? Stoat asked in a new voice and a hard one. —You interferin with a Federal officer, goin about his duty?

Jeff ostentatiously ignored Stoat, planting his feet and turning his back pointedly. He spoke on earnestly to Wafer. —It'll be like all the rest, he said. It'll be like all the rest that ever was, a rich man's war and a poor man's fight. Like all the rest that ever was.

—You're advisin your nephew into trouble, Stoat said.

Jeff Rupert turned, and fixed the man in the black suit with his red eye. —You, Stoat, he said. You talk a mighty rough game. But you'll never see the muzzle of a rifle.

Stoat bridled. His mouth made a bitter line. —Nor you, either, Sweet, he snapped.

Jeff Rupert looked full on at Wafer. He bit it off sharp, his voice full of anguish, —I heard what was told to me. I seen what all I seen and I studied on it and I know. These people ain't none of us. Jeff jerked his head at Stoat. —Especially not *this* carpetbaggin son of a bitch.

—I have to go anyway, said Wafer. He sounded tired. His voice was gentle, but a gentle voice is not much account, in certain places and times. Wafer made a nimble leap, and a pause at the top to regain his balance, and stood in the truckbed, looking out at all the people gathered. He looked down at his uncle. His uncle's face was a mask of distress. Wafer gestured gently The high school band, in ragged rows, and under the malevolent tutelage of its cadaverous chieftain, made a ragged beginning on a march by Sousa. The music teacher bared his teeth in frustration; the boys, flinching, found the course of the music more-or-less, and pressed on.

Wafer stood with one hand on the bed staves of the Model T; they all listened, as the Sousa sighed to an uneven conclusion. The teacher was livid. He gestured peremptorily, and the band struck up *Dixie*. The old men in gray cried out raggedly. The people waved their flags. Stoat, with a parting glare at J.R. Sweet, got in the cab of his truck. The driver, waiting all this time, put it in gear. And the band played, and the flags waved, and the truck lurched in a cloud of white dust into the road, headed for Mineral Wells.

* * *

And lulled by the rocking truck, Wafer dreamt. He woke from his dream of a dust bird with no wings, dragging its feathers in the barnyard. He dreamt, too, of a man in a duster like a

cowhand wears. He dreamt of a madness that brooked no stopping on the road to its heart's desire, or its heart's greatest terror. Sometimes those are the one thing. And he dreamt as well what a preacher might say, shouting in a rage at God, naked in the barnyard; God in a whilrwind that ate the earth from beneath you, for all that He knows or all that He cares. In a waste of time like no clock ever tallied.

Thinking: I've *seen* him with that blood on his teeth. The bastard.

Who was the bearded man? Who stood in his dream by the well, and worked the pump handle. Clear cold water, spurting on his hand, and he raised it to his mouth, to drink. The water gushed cold and clear in the palm of his good right hand in the sunlight. His beard was the color of his coat. His flesh was as leached, his eyes as vague, as bloodless as his face, shaded by his hatbrim. But his hand came away dripping the cold clear droplets, and his mouth was red as smiles. He pumped at the pump with his left hand, cold too, in the shade of his own gray flesh. In the barnyard the pungent hard whiff of cattle, sharp ammoniac reek of the trodden mud by the stock tank. Lost in his dream, where sense is useless, and what would have you jailed elsewhere, the norm and the yardstick. He asked the man:

—Why *do* you draw the water?

—I ever drew it.

said the man back. He poured it on the ground and the pale yellow dust was dark with its stain. He looked up with his pale eyes and said:

—Not one of you is anything, save my hand, that it smites you.

—I will hit you back.

—I smite you even now.

said the man. He said still more. He said:

—And there is only silence that is left after all your speech, and silence, in between the words, has more of truth than they or you will ever know. But that is your business. And you will say the words as if they matter. That will make them matter. Won't it?

* * *

Startled awake by his own cry, he sat up to the startled looks of his fellows, but never said one word more. What can you say, of a strange and frightful dream? The dusty road, from Perrin to Mineral Wells, came to an end. From the depot at Mineral Wells, they boarded a train. Ladies from the Red Cross filled them up on sandwiches, lemonade, and white cake. They each had a tag, wound to a topmost shirtbutton, or threaded through a hole punched then and there by one or another of the horde of impatient officials. The card identified them as newly-drafted soldiers of the United States Army. A gaggle of farm boys, gawking at the tumult and the crowd that was only themselves, in mail-order overalls from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, with slouch hats or caps or none, and even one with a white straw boater. Such citizens of the town as about the station in that hour waved still more of the same little flags as in Perrin, and cheered them off all over again, while the train sprayed sparks and smoke, and huffed great soft billows of white steam. They were joined in Mineral Wells by fifty or so others, from other small towns, and the bunch of them, Wafer with the rest, headed off to Fort Worth, and the brand-new training camp hurriedly rising west of the town. It was called Camp Bowie.

A uniformed sergeant named Mays joined them there, too. He lined them up in the dust of the street by the terminal. They stood in three rows by the red-brick walls of the station, while Mays walked up and down in front of them. He would never speak again in so nearly a

conversational a voice, nor so without profanity, while he told them how he expected them to behave, and what the trip would be like, and where they were going, and other things that Wafer never could afterward call to mind. Mays in that moment seemed a man like other men, not attempting particularly to be above himself, or above anyone. He released them very promptly to the tender mercies of the Red Cross ladies. While the new soldiers gorged on lemonade, sandwiches, and cake, Mays himself waited placidly beside the terminal, on a bench in the shade.

The train ride was not a long one, but it stopped at just about every country station, and at each one more new soldiers boarded. The country was being stripped systematically of men and boys of certain ages. They all arrived at last at the T and P terminal in Fort Worth. Mays, and the other non-coms accumulated en route, loaded them into trucks, and the trucks took them west out of town. They passed down a paved street named Arlington Heights Boulevard. The tires made a different sound on the gravel-and-oil pavement, which gave way abruptly to gravel and caliche, to terminate finally in the far more familiar rutted mud. They lurched and they bounced to the camp, a tent city sprouting in an open field. They piled out of the trucks, and milled about in the open near a complex of raw-looking yellow pine buildings in various stages of near-completion. Others, in the distance, mere frameworks; the camp streets, like the terminus of Arlington Heights, were dirt.

Shrieking, termagant non-coms, including Mays, formed them up in that field, and divided them into casual detachments, preparatory to permanent assignments. Wafer's Jack County gaggle was promptly lost in the moiling herd, made up entirely of gawking, rawboned farmboys, from all over north central Texas. Wafer was in Casual Training Detachment 336B, in the keeping of none other than Mays, whose own transformation was the most complete and

amazing Wafer witnessed that day. They all stood awe-struck, in the spray of the man's profanity and spittle. It didn't seem possible that this was the same man who had spoken so quietly before.

They were also each assigned a 6-digit number—a personal number that they were required at once to memorize—and the Army knew them thereafter. Wafer was 005482. All this was the start of a process that would gradually assemble them into an entity, that would cross the country to the seaboard, and cross the ocean to France. The details of any personal history at odds with the Army's need did not in this process matter in the least. It was clear forthwith that the Army knew all, even when it didn't know—*especially* when it didn't know—and the official representative of the Army in the particular corner of perdition in which Wafer found himself, was none other than the redoubtable Sergeant Mays, whom he had just as well have known all his life, for all the additional change the man ever underwent in Wafer's knowing.

They vanished, individually and collectively, into the mass of the 36th Division of the American Expeditionary Force, forming up at Camp Bowie in Fort Worth, Texas, in the autumn of 1917. They kept them so busy, that Wafer hardly noticed the coming of October. But he was told, in due course, that he himself was at present a part of the hundred and forty-second Infantry Regiment, somewhat less exalted than the hundred forty-first, but still a unit with a proud and lethal tradition. They had classes on the subject, in between calisthenics and running, and close-order-drill and running, and for some reason, frequent games of tug-o'-war. And running. The hundred forty-first was said to have descended from Company A of the First Regiment of something called the Texas Volunteer Guard. They talked about San Jacinto—which Wafer knew about—and Neches Creek—which he didn't. They were told to have pride in their

association with so distinguished a history. They were told that the entire Division—the 36th—composed around elements of the Oklahoma and Texas National Guard—descended from that First Texas Infantry and other, equally bloody-minded and illustrious groupings, all from a violent and storied past. They were told that they would make the world safe for democracy, defeat the Hun (or Bosche or Jerry, and even if your name did happen to be Rudloff or Ickes or Planck, like Harry and Otto), and return home conquering heroes. Meanwhile, there was also a class in Military Etiquette, and the Code of Conduct. And a tug-o'-war game. And running.

The whole thing about officers took him aback, swift and hard—like Mays's sudden assumption of power, mirrored up the line at company, regiment, brigade, and division itself, by what seemed to Wafer equally sudden and equally baseless usurpations. Only moreso. There was old Justin Peabody, from a nameless hamlet built around a cotton gin not far at all from Perrin, whose Daddy made his living renting out farms to niggers on thirds and fourths, while selling them supplies and use of the gin out of a store at the same crossroad, all at inflated prices. The Sweets, on the other hand, while descended from Yankees arrived forty years before—the Peabodys had been Confederates—owned their own land and farmed it themselves, which made them somewhat better in the social scheme of things than the nigger-chiseling Peabodys—it wasn't disrespectable, it was just not *as* respectable as farming. Wafer's family, the Robertses—they were farmers but also Confederates, and were not poor at all, at least not anymore; and they were the *most* respectable, having both money and tenure. He thought uneasily of his father's purchase of a country store, in the years before the war. They *had* been the poorest, it was said; but now the Sweets were poor. Wafer didn't like to think about his family, and this all the more reason. Getting away from them was half his reason for being here. And somehow, that made it

a lot easier to accept the new structure forced on him by the Army.

Because here, old Justin Peabody was a Lieutenant of something, and Wafer had to salute him. Of course, Justin *was* town, of a sort, and had finished High School in Jacksboro—stayed with an aunt to do it. But the assumption that Wafer, as a Roberts, was just *better* than some folks didn't apply here: Wafer hadn't finished school anyplace. Maybe that was it. This place, this *thing*, that he was part of now, clearly had its own hierarchy, and it wasn't the one that Wafer Sweet had learned from the cradle. Though it was this similar: just as it had been assumed that Wafer was better than some folks—an assumption unnecessary even to speak aloud—so, too, now, the assumption was that he just *wasn't* as good as some folks, who were really some of the same folks he used to be better than, and that assumption didn't need to be spoke aloud, either, but was acquiesced to by all. He and they wore uniforms, with slightly different insignia, and that was that. It was all just like the damned store his Daddy had bought. A symbol. An announcement of change. A marker of position.

Assumptions like these rankled him seriously, even if they had been made all his life. They had been to his advantage, before. He didn't like it now, he didn't like putting up with it, but here he was—GREETINGS! the letter had said. Friendly, like it was a joyous occasion, or possibly even Wafer's idea in the first place—and then he thought of Uncle Jeff, who was something more than an uncle, and then—that line of thought was closed off quickly, with a brief grimace, and a scowl that reached in him as deep as he went, to places he never visited. It had never been discussed, not by anyone, not since the long, silent trek down the ridge from the grave, stumbling drunk in the dark. Here he was, in the Army, and here he would stay, and here, he *had* to put up with it. It gave him to wonder about the assumptions he'd begun with, and

never had any cause or desire to question. Questions arose in him, that never after could be put away. Time to consider them, at any length, was another thing. The Army kept him busy and busier. They kept everyone busy.

There were, in addition to the physical training—not very difficult, for Wafer—baffling and endless lectures, all in the same airless hall, columned with four-by-fours. They had been placed to shore up an unlooked-for weakness in the hasty structure. It was all an endless grind of training, and much, much worse than the mildly boring introduction. The training was worse also in the parts that weren't exactly boring; worse for the bone-numbing drudgery. Though strangely, very little actual time passed. Each new thing a test. You had to prove you were man enough. You had to master the spit-and-polish nonsense. You had to listen to the lectures. One lecture was history: it seemed the hundred forty-second had once killed some Indians. That was the glorious tradition, of which they were all now a part. Eventually, in the same airless hall, there was also a lecture about women. It was presented with vivid, gory slides--hand-tinted. Apparently, the command was well aware of the many girls who plied an ancient trade in Fort Worth, Texas. You got the idea that no sore from any venereal disease was ever located anywhere, other than the penis or the anus, and that all were flaming, vivid red, and very wet indeed.

By November, the tents were filling up. There were many new soldiers. Most of the men in the hundred forty-second were Texans, with a leavening of Oklahomans, some of them Indians. There was the boy Martin from Mineral Wells, a rosy-cheeked fellow, who blushed at the mention of the whores available on Rusk Street in Fort Worth, and Exchange Street in North Fort Worth. He eventually sampled them, despite his shyness. There was a morose boy named

McAllister, who said little and kept to himself, reading a Bible. Wafer conceived an immediate dislike for him. If McAllister ever visited a whore, he kept it a close dark secret. There were others, too, all young, all full of beans, one way or the other, and some of meanness, too. The Army channeled the meanness, or tried to. The Army liked it when found, but didn't like it at all, when it didn't go where the Army wanted it. It wanted it to go across the ocean to France, where it would be permitted to kill and maim certain classes of people, with temporary impunity. Indeed, the killing of Germans and their allies was envisioned as a public service, and a benefit to the world at large. Even if your name did happen to be Rudloff or Ickes.

There was one boy named Gerald Waterston. Wafer met Gerald first a day in late October, a few weeks after the hundred forty-second had been officially constituted, when the new tent assignments were handed out. Wafer knew him for an Okie—by then, he knew most of the Texans by sight—and Gerald was dark, darker than Wafer, but not as dark as a Mexican. Wafer figured him for some kind of Indian or other, and they both sat in the tent on their cots, that first day, mute with shyness. Their were six others who lived there with them, but only McAllister—silent in a corner with his Bible—was just then present. The sides of the tent were raised, and bundled at the top; it riffled in the coolish autumn breeze. The floor was dirt—first they would trod it shiny smooth, and later, in the Winter, cover it with a duckboard floor they bought for themselves—but now it was still dusty. The wind raised it, just enough to be irritating. They started talking haltingly; both rubbed their eyes in the grit. No special reason. An accidental meeting, a casual exchange.

They went together to the regimental canteen. McAllister did not accompany them, but remained in the tent, with its affliction of dust. Wafer sat with Gerald at a table, drinking coffee,

under the less-than-benign gaze of a bored, extra-duty clerk, serving coffee and doughnuts. They stole quick looks at one another. Smiled tentatively at jokes, none of them particularly funny. They sat for a long while in awkward silence, when Wafer looked up and met Gerald's eye. Perhaps he saw a reserve there to match his own. He would find out soon that he was wrong in that. He started twice to speak, only to stumble. He said finally, —How long you been here?

—Three weeks, Gerald said. His tone was relieved but his eyes still furtive, as if he sought escape, or expected he might need to.

—I been here about the same, Wafer said. I guess most of us have.

The dark boy said very suddenly, —Did you hear about em?

—Hear about who? asked Wafer.

—You know. Them niggers.

Wafer, choosing to overlook the Okie's own complexion, shook his head. He thought he knew what was coming, anyway. When niggers were mentioned, it was always pretty much the same, but he didn't want to think about it just now, or ever, though he really didn't yet know why. He knew it made him the more weary. He answered anyway, with as good grace as he could muster, —Which niggers?

—You know them niggers? The ones they're already sendin over there. You know. Regular Army niggers.

The dark Okie soldier licked his lips. His black eyes were hard, bright lumps of coal. Beyond and beneath those eyes, an importuning that hadn't words. The boy glanced around conspiratorially, and then leaned over the table and asked, —How'll they do, you think?

Wafer didn't know what he meant. —In the fightin?

Gerald looked incredulous. He said, —No! You ever see a nigger one could fight? You ever see a nigger who *would* fight? You ever see a nigger could do anything?

Wafer shrugged. —Well, yeah.

Gerald's head ducked. Wafer couldn't tell if Gerald blushed or not, but went on, —My Daddy's got a nigger lives on our farm, he works like a steam shovel. Two niggers, man and wife, and they're both pretty handy. Hattie pretty well raised me, in some ways. Not many niggers in Jack County, outside of Jacksboro and Mineral Wells, but them two, and a few of their relatives. In our part of it, the part I know. And I don't really know about the others, but those two work like dogs. They're the only ones I ever really knew, myself. But there's still that fellow Jack Johnson, ain't there? *He* sure fights.

Gerald ignored everything that Wafer said, and said himself, fixedly to a point several inches past Wafer's right ear, —I never knew no niggers to speak of.

The Okie seemed to want something—some kind of reassurance—and if Wafer had known what it was, and it was in his gift, he would freely have given it.

The Okie boy went on, —Them in Ardmore or Ada stays to themselves. Everybody stays to themselves, in Ardmore. You know?

—That where you're from?

—No. The Indian brooded. He had a war between brooding and friendliness more-or-less continuously. Wafer would discover, later, that the friendliness was natural. He seemed to think the brooding was expected of him. But his brooding mannerisms came out much more like shyness, anyway, and that seemed natural with him, too. The profanity, on the other hand, was recently acquired and painfully affected. He said, abruptly and a little bitterly, —Them

madamoysels *all* fuck niggers.

Wafer blanched slightly at this, the most forbidden word of all, but had been at Camp Bowie just long enough that he didn't gasp aloud. This mention of Frenchwomen and the Negro troops of the Ninth and Tenth regiment, who were already in France, was pretty much in the vein that Wafer had expected, a perennial topic of angry or rueful conversation among the enlisted men. Gerald never acknowledged Wafer's comment on Jack Johnson at all. He asked, —Did you see them federal niggers in Ada?

—I never been to Ada. I came in through the draft board at Mineral Wells.

The Okie shrugged. —Not much to it nohow. Hoss, you know they call General Pershing *nigger* Jack, don't you?

He did know, and he knew why, too, but he asked anyway, —Why do they call him that?

—He commanded nigger troops. He commanded them right here in Texas, I guess. I know he did in the Spanish War. I guess he likes niggers. I don't much care for em, myself. Gerald looked down into his hands, curled around the coffee cup. He glanced up quickly once, a fleeting contact with Wafer's eyes. The he said, —In the papers they call him *black* Jack, don't they?

—They was some nigger troops at Fort Richardson a long time back, Wafer said. But that was way before my time. I never saw a nigger in any kind of uniform.

—Where's Fort Richardson?

—Jacksboro.

—Them frogs like a nigger. But I guess that ain't so bad. You know? And then, the Okie grinned all suddenly, as if his anxieties had fallen away, and said brightly, —They'll sure

fuck me if they'll fuck a monkey like that.

Shocked again at the language, and its strange congruence with Gerald's sunny smile, Wafer stuttered, —France is a long ways from Texas, I guess.

Wafer cradled his coffee in his hands and hunched his shoulders, hiding his discomfort, furious at his own naivete. It embarrassed him in a burning, reflexive kind of way. It embarrassed him the moreso that his discomfort had worsened with repetition, rather than lessened. There was a lot of that kind of swearing here, and he still wasn't used to it. When he heard it—and he heard it a *lot*—he thought of his mother, church, Brother Earl; and of spewing out those words himself, long and loud, while they all gasped, and stared at him in shock. That was a strangely pleasing notion. The steam long since had stopped rising from his coffee; when he sipped it, it was lukewarm.

The dark soldier nodded at him happily. He seemed to think Wafer a wise man, and the thought of that wreathed him in smiles. Wafer was at least friendly. And then Gerald saddened just as quickly again, and he said with a terrible gravity, —It's a long ways from Oklahoma, too.

And fell for a long minute to studying his fingernails, before he added, —Before you ask me, my Mama was part Comanche and my Daddy was white. But her daddy was white, too, so I'm a quarter breed.

Gerald's face twisted on his words, and within him Wafer's heart twisted, too, out of pity for the boy's strange earnestness. He spoke of none of it, though, but nodded instead, and stuck out his hand. As they shook, and Wafer said, —I wasn't goin to ask, but I thank you.

—They's whores in town.

Taken aback at this new suddenness, atop all the other mood and subject swings, Wafer

jerkily nodded his agreement. Then Gerald burst out:

—Say, hoss. You want to take in a cockfight this weekend?

* * *

Wafer had gone into town already more than once. Once, he went to a chaperoned YMCA dance, put on especially for the troops, where earnest young girls, some of them pretty, in the regulation white frilly dresses of summer, had served punch and cake. They sat in chairs that lined the dance floor wall, waiting to be asked to dance. Each girl had a beribboned, pale, pink-and-white pancake hat, lain in the lap, under the hands. They took turns dispensing cake, coffee, and conversation, or allowing themselves to be held lightly in the arms, at a strictly policed hand's width distance. Wafer was afraid to tighten his grip. He envisioned breakage, irate policemen, tongue-tied explanations in front of a scowling judge. They were more like delicate, Chiffon lace *things*, weightless in your arms, than they were like real women.

And there *were* chaperones—large, formidable women, who should have been shipped to France themselves, as shock troops. They were all unfailingly polite, resolutely patriotic, and kept the virginal girls as inaccessible as photographs. The girls themselves filled Wafer with a vague disquiet, altogether irrational, which he was also altogether unable to do away with. It was impossible to think of sex with them. His attendance at such dances, with sweeter sins than a dance to be had very close by indeed, and at reasonable prices, tapered off very quickly. The only soldier that Wafer ever knew who didn't run to the whores at least once a month, on payday, was McAllister, the boy with the Bible in his lap eternally. This was the newest thing of all, for most of the new soldiers—this ready availability, at a price, of willing women. And of course, it was also by far the favorite. The countryside and the small towns that speckled it had availed

very little in the way of such things.

Though be it said, *some* whores were for officers only. Others catered to enlisted men specifically. Still others carried on with still more catholic clientele, at lower prices. There must have been ten or more houses, of the latter type, in the region called Hell's Half Acre, centered on Rusk Street, near downtown—they changed its name to Commerce, in the half year and more that Wafer was there, about the same time they started laying brick pavement on Camp Bowie Boulevard, formerly Arlington Heights. It was surely an appropriate change. Still more whorehouses were located near Exchange Street, in the smaller town called North Fort Worth, by the stockyard pens and the Swift-Armour slaughterhouses. Those were places that churned out canned meats for the U.S. Army at an accelerating and highly profitable clip, as they had already been doing for European armies for two years. There was a lot of money in North Fort Worth, just then. There was a lot of money everywhere. The war had seemed to swell the economy, not least with the ready cash of the soldiers themselves. Everyone was making money, and lots of it.

But the cathouses. You walked inside, say, the one over Barber's drug store. Spread out before you, sprawled on divans thoughtfully provided for the purpose, were any number of girls, of various shapes and sizes and colors, dressed one in night clothes, the next in a simple housedress, such as a wife might wear, the next in a dress a woman might wear to church; but usually something quickly and easily shucked. It was said that in the officer's houses, they wore even frillier things, with fur and satin and ribbons and even pearls. The drill might have been more subtle there, but Wafer suspected in essence it was the same: you paid your money to the bouncer at the bar, or desk, or table—always a big man, and mean-looking—and you picked your choice from the buffet provided, and then you went back to tiny little rooms equipped with

narrow, cot-like beds (and also, in the better and pricier places, like Mamie's over Barber's, with a bowl and a pitcher of water and a towel) and you screwed. Nothing imaginative; just the basic act. Anything else cost extra. Mamie's—Gerald and Wafer's ultimate favorite—also included a light and a pull chain at each door. If the light was on, business was being transacted within; if the light was off, the room was available for business. Systematic, and no nonsense. It scratched the itch; but it was not (now and then, if infrequently, the bouncer at Mamie's still found it needful to whack a soldier with his black leather sap) without its own chaperones.

The first time Wafer and Gerald went to a whorehouse, it was on Rusk Street: a set of six rooms off a short hall in the back of a saloon that featured Taxi dancers who were also, of course, whores—though some still with amateur standing. There were different girls in the back. The pleasures of that place were brief, and less than convivial. Wafer's first was less memorable than he wanted. Whose isn't? By the middle of November, he thought himself an old hand. It disturbed him, though, more than he was ready to admit, the distance, the *impersonality* of it. One time, among his very first times, that became especially clear.

He sat the bed in one of the cribs, in a cheaper house, slowly dragging on his clothes while the whore—pretty enough in a blowsy, overworked kind of way—shooed him like a fly. She told him the time was up, to get out, or she would call someone named Teetoe. An old nigger woman came in just then, with a rag and a bucket and a set of clean sheets. She wore a black, dusty dress, and a red-and-white rag tied on her head, and an apron. Wafer watched her, his attention suddenly riveted; the whore prodded him, and he waved her off. She snorted at him derisively, and left. Wafer moved from the bed and leaned on the wall while he pulled on his socks, and then knelt to lace his shoes. The woman went about tidying the room.

—Who're you? Wafer asked.

She looked up once, a piercing glance, and away.

—Ophelia, she answered.

—You from around here?

—I'm here, ain't I?

—Yeah. Me too. Wafer stood up.

She finished the bed. The bouncer's tread was in the hall. Ophelia said, not unkindly, —Move along, country boy. If you don't you fixin to have yourself a world of hurt.

Wafer walked out of the room and down the hall past the bouncer, a mustachioed man with abroad face, who hesitated, hand dipped uncertainly in his jacket pocket, and looked disappointed. Wafer realized the woman had made him think of Hattie, back home. He wondered what Hattie was doing. It made him lonely to think of her. It made him think that he had been in a world of hurt a long time, a silence between himself and his parents, that Hattie kept in trust for all three. He didn't know yet that there were worlds and worlds of hurt, gradations and degrees of hurt, and of other things, too, that went with it. He still thought himself too manly to weep.

* * *

Not everything was bad at Camp Bowie. Far from it. There were actually good things, too—for instance, his new Springfield rifle. It had about it both a familiarity, and a lethal beauty, that soothed him when he felt the periodic and near-overwhelming desire to kill, slowly and painfully, both his drill sergeant—Mays, the master of invective, abuse, and profanity—and the two rather remote young lieutenants, who were said to lead his platoon. And also, from time to

time, the random Captain or Major. To say nothing of *the* Captain, an elevated, Olympian sort of personage, said to command his company, to whom Wafer never once aspired to speak with directly, until much later. None of it had really been all *that* bad, and with the town so near—well. Some of it had been good, *really* good. Army life at that point had rather agreed with him. When he qualified on the range, he took Sharpshooter honors. He felt like God Himself, when he took that rifle in his hand.

* * *

He and Gerald went to the illegal cockfights together, too, and pretty frequently. The first time there was more thrill than the first whore. They were held at the 66 Saloon, on Rusk Street. The fights were held every weekend; they were exciting, and extremely bloody. The room unfailingly adrift in coils of smoke, smoke rising in clumps and mounds, drifting aimlessly, the ghosts of chickens past. It vented at last lazily from the high windows. The spittoons ran full constantly. The promoters employed a nigger porter full-time, just to keep them usable.

And the shouting, gesticulating, red-faced soldiers and civilians, exclusively male, gathered at that sand pit each and every Saturday. The pit was marked with cryptic, swirling glyphs of chicken tracks, and spattered with chicken feathers, and blood. The handlers kept the chickens in a yard nearby, staked and tethered a few feet apart, until they were brought in for a bout. Any closer than that, the chickens would fight then and there. They would fight at the mere sight of one another, if they could reach. It was a grim and strangely moving spectacle, and Wafer watched it his first time utterly enrapt, from a seat high on the top of a bleak and splintery tier of bleachers cobbled up out of scrap lumber, the whole thing like a small, mean amphitheater. There were slit openings at opposite sides, where people came and went, including

the chickens and the handlers. It never occurred to Wafer to feel shame for the thrill it gave him, the awe incident to a cruel, but somehow also splendid spectacle. He was slightly sickened by it, though he shook that off easily. And did not think about it at all otherwise, so far as he could contrive. The birds themselves were fascinating.

They would strut during conflict, beak open, tongue extended, black pebble eyes intent. Razors were mounted on the spurs of the reddish-yellow, clawed feet; each fight ended if not with two, then with one pile of bloody feathers, and a fistfight—or two, or three—erupting among the handlers or even the spectators, over bets that had been made, or sheer passionate devotion to a particular bird. The fights began with the handlers holding the birds in their hands. The birds locked on one another instantly, a feral sentience not present otherwise awakened on sight. The handlers thrust them together; the neck feathers ruffled and flared, flaming out like ruff collars; they dropped them into the ring. Released, the birds would mount the air, pedaling with their feet, razors flashing, intent on the kill. They strutted the sand floor in wide swinging circles, scratching like bulls at one another. Then at it again, slashing too with hooked beaks, heads jabbing like striking snakes, and always, the recourse to the razor on the spur. A bright spray of blood arced through the air at last; fell in loops like shining ribbon, from a wound like the red bow on a present. And one bird reeling, reeling, while the other closed in.

Whatever vice you desired was available. You could get up a game of cards almost anywhere in Fort Worth—just as illegal, and almost as popular as cockfights—and there were prizefights, too, in North Fort Worth, at the coliseum near the stockyards. It occurred to Wafer one day, that within two months of his arrival here, he had committed just about every sin he ever had been warned against, excepting murder. It occurred to him, too, that the neglected sin was

the one he was being trained to do, and not modestly, either—trained to do on the grand scale. He tried not to think of that, as he tried not to think at all of the commandment regarding respect to parents, or for that matter commandments generally. His feelings for his parents were rather too complicated to bear, so he met them with silence, the turn of his back, and a blind, dry eye. Thou shalt *not*—.

All in all, camp life and city weekends overwhelmed him somewhat, though he bore it well. Never before, in all his short life, had Wafer been further from Perrin than Jacksboro. For him, this was all as if he had been set down gawking on the town square of Sodom, and given the freedom of the city. That was a particularly wicked notion, and he found he liked it; and he found he liked Fort Worth—*cowtown*, they called it, or sometimes Panther City. He and Gerald were boon companions. Because he was a soldier, Gerald's swarthy complexion was usually overlooked, or readily glossed over, hardly spoke of at all by the management of the businesses they catered to—at least, when Wafer was with him. Despite what Hugh had said, Wafer was never mistaken for other than a white man. But Gerald never so much as tried a YMCA dance. There were respectable folk there. It was probably a good idea that he not. Wafer never went back there, either.

He and Gerald became fast friends. Maybe not an especially durable friendship, as yet, but serviceable enough; they went to the cockfights together, and they ran to the whores. A succession of more-or-less identical cribs, whence they repaired with country girls and occasionally a scrubbed-up Mex or high-yellow. And they drank—someone told him once that in this Year of Our Lord, Nineteen-hundred-seventeen, there were almost two hundred saloons in Fort Worth, and fewer than twenty churches—they drank more than Wafer had ever imagined

that anyone could. He was astounded at his own capacity, and in awe of Gerald's. Toward the end of October, an outbreak of measles briefly closed the camp. The epidemic waned quickly; they went, with whetted pleasure, back to the weekend fleshpots of town. Tours of duty—guard, KP, latrine—kept them down very seldom. They grew inches, they filled out with muscle, and they restlessly searched for new and amazing ways of spending what seemed a great deal of money. And that was also about the time they discovered Mamie's, the whorehouse over Barber's Drugs, off Rusk Street.

* * *

If you knew where it was, you just walked through the drugstore and into the stairwell. You went up a long, narrow staircase to a vestibule. The inevitable bouncer—a beefy redfaced type in a tight gray suit with too-short sleeves, and a silk tie, the knot hidden by his ample spread of chins, and a mismatched porkpie hat—sat behind a rickety desk. He nodded them through after peering closely at Gerald, who by then had obtained his PFC stripes. They passed into the outer room, where the whores waited in bored poses. The madam—Mamie herself, a large woman showing a wide shelf of cloven flesh above the red satin and fluffy trim of her fancy dress—walked toward them smiling. She, too, looked closely at Gerald.

—You Meskin? she asked Gerald archly.

Wafer said, —We get a lot of sun.

He started to say more, but Gerald answered, smiling, for himself. His confidence had of late expanded greatly. He said, — No, I ain't a Meskin. I'm a United States soldier, and I'm please to meet you.

—And what the hell are you besides that?

Gerald grinned the more broadly, ducking his head in feigned but ingratiating shyness. —I'm a man-about-town with money to spend, he said. He took out his sheaf of bills and waved it. He indicated a little blonde. —And if you ain't available yourself I want that one.

It was the madam's turn to smile and the smile became a laugh easily. —Allrighty, soldier, she said. She turned to Wafer, waggled her eyebrows. —How about you, stringbean?

Wafer saw a little dark girl, clearly at least part Negro, with warm brown almond eyes. She saw him looking, and she thrust her chin toward him and her eyes widened slightly, as if she challenged him. Wafer said quickly, —I'll have this one.

—Like that dark meat, hoss? Gerald catcalled. The Madam drew herself up, offended. She took their money, and then she said, —Beulah is our newest girl. We've had nothin but compliments about her.

—I'll bet, said Gerald.

—You mind your manners, she said. She was still smiling. But turning abruptly all business, she said to the girls, —Off you go. She made shooing motions with her hands.

They all clumped down the one hallway past rooms with lights and pullchains above the door. Some of the lights were on. They could hear the bedsprings squeak within, the labored breathing, one sharp cry. Gerald's girl pulled him into a doorway—Wafer caught a glimpse of his dark grinning face as it vanished. The girl pulled on the light and shut the door.

Wafer's girl walked into a room, also pulling on the light as she passed it. The room was filled with an odor of many perfumes, all different, battling for supremacy. A lamp stood on a rickety table beside the bed. She turned it on, too. The bed was little more than a cot. The crushed narrow mattress spilled over the frame-mounted springs. The room was tiny, with

pinkish-orange wallpaper, printed up in red flowers, he thought poinsettias. The multiple petals of the flowers all pointed up, like the flames of hell from a thousand cautionary Sunday School stories. The bedside lamp garishly lit a metallic tint in the print. The girl sat on the edge of the bed, and looked up at Wafer with her almond eyes. She seemed unaccountably shy.

—What's your name? she asked him. Her hands were folded in her lap. In the room next door, Wafer heard Gerald belaboring the bedsprings early.

—Wafer, he answered.

—That's a funny name.

Wafer said nothing.

—I just mean I never heard it before—. Her voice trailed on the last word. She sounded a little hurt, and seemed even more shy. Now her eyes were downcast. Her hands folded nervously in her lap. Poinsettia Hades flared behind her.

—It's nothin, he said. His voice was flat and distant. There was more turmoil in him than he betrayed. He watched her as she glanced up; back down at her own bare feet, one of which she rubbed with the other; and up again, straight into Wafer's own eyes. Her hands just covered her pudenda. She seemed about to blush or weep.

—It's nothin, really, he said.

She visibly collected herself. —Where you from? she asked.

—Perrin.

—I know where that is. That's between Jacksboro and Mineral Wells. I worked in the hotel there, at Mineral Wells. She pushed out her chin, a little defiant again, trying to be brassy. —Ever have a woman before, Wafer?

—Sure, he said.

—Ever have one before you come to cowtown?

—Sure, he lied.

—Come sit with me.

He sat beside her on the bed. They were like two guilty children, about to play house, fearful of discovery. He marveled that he could still be that way, after his last two months, but so he was. They undressed slowly, surreptitiously examining one another, and lay back on the narrow bed, only to hide under the covers quickly. He still couldn't grasp why this was all so different. Nor would he ever, not fully. He explored her, and to his amazement was explored by her. He asked, —Don't tell me this is *your* first time. Is it?

And she answered, blushing, —It's my second.

And he marveled at that. He wondered if it were true, and decided that it was. The madam was pounding on the door, before they were through. A confusion of things were in him. He wondered anew if she lied to him—he couldn't help it—but he couldn't ask, either, for fear it would hurt her; and that seemed strange in itself. He said to her impulsively, whispering needlessly in the empty room, as he pulled on his clothes, —Can I see you? Can I see you somewhere else, I mean, than this?

—What are you thinkin of? I got my little brothers.

—But I got to see you. His voice was more desperate than he could believe. As if he had been primed and ready to feel the thing he felt, that he didn't even know what to call it, but felt it the more strongly because. He could never name what he felt, but this was strong in him.

—Be quiet, she said. Don't you know where that would end? I can't live no way else

than this, not and have anything. I got my little brothers to think of. No matter how hard I try, I can't make the money no way else.

Her candor was as abrupt as his own, and he plowed onward, —I could help you.

—Shoo. Be both of us in dutch for real.

—Do you step out, Beulah?

—Shoo, boy. They all of you wants the same thing, nigger or white man.

—I want more than that. Step out with me.

She looked at him expressionlessly. —Where you just been?

He hesitated. Then he looked her in the eye, and said, —Dreamin of you.

—Fool. I'm a nigger.

The pounding on the door renewed, and a threat with it.

Wafer said, —I don't care.

She watched him all the way down the hall, the madam fussing all the way at the both of them, and standing against the wall placidly watching the big bouncer, hand in pocket, smiled at some secret of his own, and fingering his sap gently, he dreamed at a gas lamp on the wall across.

* * *

On a day a month or so later, Wafer walked out of Washer Brothers with a new suit bundled in a sack, blushing furiously. He had hardly known what to ask for, and owning the thing seemed an embarassment now. He walked down Main for a few steps, the new suit clumsy in his hands, and heard someone call his name—*Wafer!* —a name sufficiently rare to turn his head. He scanned the crowds, suit in its sack held out defensively, looking for a familiar face. The crowds were as unnerving as always. He almost turned and walked away, toward the

courthouse and the streetcar stand, as had been his original intention, when he saw striding, almost running, from the direction of the Westbrook Hotel, none other than Hugh Sweet, decked out in as fine a suit of clothes as Wafer had ever seen, or ever heard tell of. Much finer than the one he carried.

—Damn, Wafer, it *is* you, Hugh said, when he'd reached easy earshot. He shook his head grinning, tipped back his derby, and went on, —Damn, cousin. How the hell are you?

And his bright blue eyes glittered in the shade of the brim of the new-looking derby, a fine thing with a nap recently brushed. Suddenly Wafer was back on the ridge in Jack County, with Junior mutely nodding: yes, it *is* true. Wafer and Hugh had never spoken of that day at all. Seldom spoke to one another at all. They did not speak of it now, yet it lay between them. Hugh pulled him down the street, chattering excitedly. There was one of the innumerable cowtown cafes on the ground floor of the Westbrook—one of the best ones, and expensive. They went there, at Hugh's insistence, and sat in a booth. They stared at one another,

—What you got in the bundle? asked Hugh.

—A new suit, Wafer said. He shifted uncomfortably.

—Damn. You're gonna wrinkle it, carryin it thataway. You ought to have it cleaned and pressed.

Wafer ignored that. He asked, —So what do you do these days?

Hugh grinned at him. —Oil, boy. Ain't you heard what's doin over in Ranger?

—I heard they got oil flowin a foot deep on the highway.

—Yeah. That's true, Hugh said. He waved his hand dismissively, —Only it's more like three feet, and it ain't like they's a shortage of the stuff, now is it? Money to be made from here

to sundown, I tell you. He shook his head happily and looked at Wafer slyly, wiggling his eyebrows. —Mostly it's on account of you soldier boys, you know that? I ought to go on over there myself, and thank the Kaiser personal.

The waitress came with coffee. Hugh and Wafer stared at one another across the table somewhat warily. Finally Hugh spoke again, —So how *is* the Army life?

—Noisy, Wafer answered. We go shoot our Springfields—and it's a damn fine rifle, I will say. We drill. We have a tug-of-war. We go to a lecture on personal hygiene, or on why we should hate Germans, or on the glorious regiment of which we are a part. Hand-to-hand trainin sometimes, too. Grenade drill. Then we just plain drill some more. We go watch someone shoot off a field gun, we have another tug of war. That sort of thing. And then we drill. Same stuff, over and over and over, day after day.

—You don't sound like you like it much.

—What's to like? They made me a corporal.

—You ask for that?

—No.

—You want it?

—No. They gave it and I took it.

Hugh shook his head, smiling. —You always was one to lay back and take things. Endure, like in Bible days. Sweet sufferin Jesus, that's you. Hugh grinned hugely, a glint in his eyes, so like Wafer's, and so unlike. He said, around his mouthful of teeth, very casually, —You don't like it? Why don't you desert?

Wafer smiled, and shook his head. Hugh mentioned it—deserting—twice more before

they parted. They ordered lunch—steaks—and Hugh insisted on paying. When he did pay, he peeled the bills off a huge roll, held together with what appeared to be a silver clip. Gold inlay, it looked like. While they ate, Wafer asked, in a carefully neutral voice, —How's your Dad?

Hugh snorted. —I swear to God, the old fool is turnin into a red.

—How do you mean?

—I mean a regular Eugene Debs, is what. Some of the things he says—.

There was a pause. They ate, busy in mutual silences. When they finished, they each lit a smoke. Hugh's was a big cigar, expensive looking. He eyed Wafer speculatively, while he carefully turned his cigar between thumb and forefinger, puffing it thoroughly alight. He said at last, —Put on your new suit of clothes some night and meet me in the Westbrook. I keep a room there. I'll show you a good time in cowtown.

—I know how to have a good time in cowtown.

—I know where the whorehouses are.

—Not all of them you don't.

* * *

There were several whorehouses Wafer knew in Stop Six. All of them were strictly for enlisted men. All of the whores were black, the house was in a black section, and of course it cost less. The soldier's told one another they weren't soldiers, weren't Texans, weren't men, until they'd fucked a nigger—Wafer acclimating still to the word *fuck*. They told one another lots of things like that. Things that made it appear both exotic and desirable to do what they all simply wished to do, which was have intercourse with whom or whatever was available, as often as possible, and thus the economy of the Stop Six houses. The prettiest whores were in the

regular houses—the kind of girls called in certain novels a mulatto, or a quadroon. Hattie would call them all high yellow, Wafer knew; or if they were lucky, the less-insulting cinnamon. He had heard all of those words, and all of the talk long before. He had never, though, thought about the girls themselves; not before Beulah. Now he thought of them constantly, in spite of his efforts not to.

He wondered what lives they must lead; did they all have family, like Beulah? The two little brothers—she never said yet what became of her parents. He'd never said *whore* and *family* in one breath, and yet it must be so, for her, about whom he could only think of as *Beulah*. He thought, too, of how the soldiers told one another lies about the things the whores did to them, and how much they paid, and whether or not the whore really cared for them—the pretense of real emotion where none existed. His slow-motion pursuit of Beulah had accelerated; had begun to overshadow other things; he ran less to whores and more to her, and *could not* think of her that way at all. It tormented him when he knew she was working. The conventional idea was that the whores were tools, to use and then discard. But Wafer was unquiet about it in his mind, common as it was, and the thought of her dried out his mouth and stirred his loins.

In the camp, the training ground onward. In response to the deaths in the measles epidemic, the size of the hospital expanded dramatically. There were sanitation fatigues, relentlessly enforced; whole platoons, whole regiments of men, marshaled in formation and strung out in a skirmish line, to pick up every little scrap of refuse. Frequent changes of bed linen. Required delousing procedures. Daily changes of clothing. Rumors of a second epidemic nosed abroad, a sickness that transformed your lungs to oatmeal. You died hacking up bloody mucus. Swimming in the sweat of your fever. It was said to be abroad already, in the North,

where the winters were sooner and harder. Winter was coming on down here, too.

* * *

He spoke to Beulah when he could, still the regular customer, all through October. He kept it up for the first week of the new month—that is, until he ran out of money. When he couldn't pay, he met her going and coming talking to her all the way in to the drug store or all the way down to the street car stop. When he could pay, he stayed with her until Mamie pounded on the door. He was lucky she didn't let the bouncer beat on him. He found out a few more things about Beulah. He found out she lived in Stop Six, a neighborhood to the south of downtown, among the better nigger neighborhoods, much better than Mosier Valley, to the northeast, or Como, not far from the camp. He found out she was a regular churchgoer. She lived in a small house, with her two small brothers, and her parents were dead, and something lurked in her past that was sad, and perhaps a little shady. The mystery deepened his lust and his longing, the sweeter that it was forbidden, or at least disavowed. He thought she felt some of the same things he did. The danger only whetted his appetite.

She was a friendly young woman. He didn't know why that surprised him—except that everything about her was surprise. What he had come to expect from blacks was so at odds with what he found in her, that he wondered why he had ever expected those things. Only to realize that he didn't expect those things from the black people he actually knew. Then to realize that after all, this was only his third or fourth close acquaintance—Hattie, Ward, Avis, now Beulah. Finally to question the reality of the opinions he had held in common with his fellows from almost the moment he had recognized any thought at all. And to realize last of all that his fellows held those opinions just as he had done—because others held them; because they were

repeated often; because they were approved. But not because he had ever actually seen anything at all like what they predicted.

The bottom line was that Wafer and Beulah enjoyed talking to one another. But she lapsed now and then to morose silence, and he found himself desperate to cheer her, to draw her out. When that spirit moved her, she would not be comforted, no matter what he did. Perhaps the different subterfuges depressed her. They employed these by tacit consent, never actually discussing them. Subterfuges like talking in public places, but talking when they were seated facing *away* from one another. Or she walking several steps behind him on the street, carrying a bundle. Once he rented a room, and spirited her into it, in the wee hours, a terribly risky operation; they sat on the bed and never touched. He brought food. He spirited her back out, and that was the end of that, but not of them.

The only times he could make love with her, was when he paid for it. At Mamie's, where it had begun; but Mamie did not grow more approving. When he reached for her elsewhere, she flinched, but he did it *more* often, not less. His hunger for her was a claw in the back of his throat, an abiding grief that never diminished, but only grew. A heat keeping time to his heartbeat. The darkness in her grief, like its mystery, only increased and encouraged all the brightness of all he felt for her, and he knew the same glow was growing in her. His obsession grew also with his enforced silence to others, even Gerald. He dare not share it, but no more examined this than they discussed the rank deception they practiced. A school of deceit, a daily lesson in subtly legitimized mendacity.

She grew frightened. She tried to cut it off. It had never gone anywhere anyway, she said. But they both knew better. He caught her on Rusk Street, not far from Mamie's, headed

for the streetcar stand, on her way home. He put on his suit to intercept her, thinking it would draw less attention than his uniform. He stopped her on the street. He must have looked the supplicant, hands out to her. She stood in a bundle, all a-quiver—actually frightened, he realized—her gaze pulled abruptly from passerby to passerby, as if any one of them at any moment, might strike her to the ground. He tried to calm her. It was late, they were in Hell's Half Acre, and the few people on the street didn't seem to pay them any mind, and Wafer said so. And still, she seemed so afraid. The people came and went and Wafer saw none of them and Beulah saw all of them. What do you fear? he asked her.

—God, she said. She whispered yet he heard her clearly. —Niggers. White folks. You.

—You shouldn't fear me.

—You just don't know, said Beulah. She seemed weighted down with an immense sorrow, years, centuries of it. Her voice stung him. —You ain't got sense to be afraid, have you? Poor boy.

—You see anyone lookin? His anger dismissed her words, but he knew she spoke a truth. —Who will care? Who cares what we do?

—You don't even *know* what you're gettin into here.

Her hand came up at her side and jerkily back down. He didn't realize, until later, that she had started to reach for his face. She went on, —I've known what it was with you from the first. You scare me. *Please* just let me alone.

—You feel it too.

—You think I don't know?

—If you know then you know you can't deny it.

—Yes I can. Go talk to one of them YMCA ladies. I know other things, too, than what you're talkin. Go meet some white girl, at one of them dances. You're fixin to have us both in trouble like you *never* seen.

—Come on. Where could we go?

—Ain't noplace you and me can go. What kind of fool are you?

Wafer looked at his feet. If she was right, he didn't care. He pressed on. He looked up again. She resolutely clamped her hand to her side a second time. —Can't we go rent a room again? A picnic? *Some*thing. *Some*where.

—Good God. She covered her mouth.

—Can't we go to your house?

—Sweet Jesus no! She started walking away.

—Why can't we go to your house?

—We both gonna die soon enough.

He stood stock still. He stared at her and he knew. The thought of her life, of the circumstances she lived and worked in, of the others she *had* to have been with, sickened him in a new way. He could not reproach her with it. His new understanding was too complete; tears stung his eyes, and he ruthlessly suppressed them, snarling in a passion the equal of her fear, his own fear concealed beneath and behind it. His gaze locked with hers and held it. She saw his eyes. She could not turn away, could not: he held her with his eyes. He started to speak.

—Don't you say it, she said.

—I *feel* it.

—Don't say it.

—*When*?

He heard her muffled response, —Oh my Sweet Jesus.

They both heard the streetcar. The bell rang as it approached. Its brakes squealed as it pulled to a stop; the wheels spat sparks, other sparks rained briefly from the electrical contacts above. He recognized with a start that people *were* watching them, and some not in a friendly way. He was glad he hadn't worn his uniform. She took out a scrap of paper and a pencil, and wrote on it. A streetcar stop, directions and an address. She caught his eye one last time. His and hers, full of the same fear and the same yearning.

She said in a whisper, a whisper like his in the crib at Mamie's:

—Sunday. Next Sunday.

And then she was in the streetcar, and the streetcar gone down the block.

* * *

In the tent that Saturday, he carefully laid out his suit. He hung it on a hook beside his cot. He had left it in town, at a cleaners, and picked it up earlier that day, eschewing his usual round of carousing. He picked at it obsessively. It became a thing with him, repeatedly grooming his new suit, in the gray hours of the early Autumn afternoon. Smoothing the lapels. Tying and re-tying the necktie, smoothing it down. Tugging at the points of the vest. Tidying the lay of the pockets. Folding and re-folding the handkerchief, which matched the tie, in the pocket. McAllister watched him all this time in thinlipped silence, looking up at intervals from the creased and worn Bible in his lap.

And Gerald, too, with his company face on, closemouthed and expressionless. He didn't like McAllister. McAllister had a tendency to question you, on the state of your soul, closely and

intimately. Even perfect strangers; and even especially perfect strangers. Gerald was acutely uncomfortable with that; Wafer not much less so. Gerald's method was to watch McAllister talk, in an absolute and expressionless silence that he never broke. It usually took him about an hour to wear the man down that way. Wafer's method tended to be more direct. Just now, he picked a microscopic fragment of lint off his suit, and turned to walk out into the company street. When he did, McAllister rose from his cot. He did not look well; he was pale and sweating. Lunging, he caught Wafer by the shirtsleeve, but released it almost in the same motion.

Wafer already was turning, with his eyes angry. He said:

—McAllister, you have laid a hand on me.

and McAllister stepped backward at once. He gestured to Wafer's bunk, said:

—You going to church?

This was met with a silence, not unlike Gerald's. Gesturing again, McAllister said:

—In your suit.

—I am not.

and McAllister's preaching face was instantly in place. But also it was wan, and he sweated heavily, even in the relative cool. His eyes feverishly glowed, and his voice came and went reedily while he said:

—Then your runnin to whores, ain't you?

and McAllister coughed. Wafer's response was instant.

—If I *was* runnin to whores, I wouldn't tell *you*. Nor regard it as any of your business. And if I *am*, then I got all the 36th Division to keep me company. Exceptin you. And Mac, I don't *need* your say-so. You been listenin to too many lectures on motherhood. And my mama

don't know the first thing of what sins I commit in the meantime. I doubt she knows much about sin at all.

—You ought to go to church, McAllister said.

Wafer rolled his eyes, —Good God. What's it to you?

—but now Mac seemed not to hear. It came to Wafer slowly that something was wrong. It would cause him shame later to know that he knew that, and did nothing.

—There will be a plague upon us, McAllister wheezed.

—I recall that portion of the scripture regardin hypocrites.

There was a mad sincerity in the man. He importuned, in an overwrought but somehow also ceremonious kind of way:

—I am no hypocrite, and you know it. God thinks us unworthy, and we *are*.

the grief unmistakable—.

—See what we are about? His nostrils cringe with the stink of us.

now gesturing broadly. In a last effort to silence the man, Wafer burst out:

—You are privy now, to the state of God's nostrils? So far as I can recollect, me nor God either one has discussed that with you. And I think that makes it none of your business.

Shocked, and impassioned, McAllister cried, —How would *you* know what God thinks?

—How would *you*?

That made him jump. He looked frightened at the thought, Over in his corner, Gerald laughed quietly, choking to hold it down. Sighing heavily, resigned like a martyr, McAllister shakily retired to his own cot, scowling. Wafer went out, satisfied at the snub he had administered, and walked for a while. He returned to lie on his cot, between McAllister and

Gerald, and wish that the day were through, and the next arrived.

* * *

In Beulah's face, as he had seen it at the streetcar stop, he dreamt the twin of his own excitement, and the shadow of his own fear. He didn't fully know the danger he courted; as he was his father's son, he *should* have known. Which gave him to wonder, *which* father? Whose son am I? He was full of lust; and a quirky odd catch, deep in his vitals, and he *did* know what it was, but didn't want much to do with feeling it, and felt it anyway. The fear—her fear, his own—fed the lust, if something else besides it fed the love. And the law, the unwritten, hardly spoken, taken-for-granted law, that he was poised to transgress—that only made it all the sweeter, providing a focus for every resentment he had ever felt, and a vengeance for the life-long sense of his own illegitimacy. *It was going to happen*. He rushed to meet it.

So that in his new suit, with the shirt pressed reasonably well, Wafer swung off the streetcar at Stop Six, and made his way down Rosedale, toward a row of shops across the street from a barbecue stand called Herschel and LeRoy's. Somewhere a guitar was being played. A voice accompanied it, filled with plaintive sorrow. Wafer crossed to the barbecue stand, and went in. A nigger named Herschel sold him a huge package of ribs, and another of brisket, and a third of beans, and a fourth of cole slaw, along with a pile of buttered toast. All of it stacked in a doubled bag he carried now, in the crook of one arm, making his way down the sidestreets to the house he knew, the house that had been described to him, the directions to it committed to memory, glancing now and then, as if he were afraid of being seen, over his shoulder. And he was afraid. And he trembled. His soul in his eyes, staring at the wood of the door, unsure of himself, so abrupt his arrival. He knocked. He glanced again over first one shoulder, and then

the other. A moment's wait. The door opened in a rush. She had been on the other side waiting. She stood with one hand pressed hard to her belly.

—There's no one here?

She shook her head no. Her breasts rose and fell under the white blouse, one long ragged breath, in and out. She was dressed conservatively. He slipped inside the door, and Beulah turned to him. Chocolate brown woman, in a frilled white blouse and a modest gray dress, black shining hair spilled down her back, held in place with a shell comb. Who looked at him shyly while she pushed closed the door, and it slammed like a judgement under her hand. The latch snicked; the bolt shot home. How strange that they should be shy; yet they were. The room reeled around him—she wore some floral scent. It seemed to rush to his forebrain, to strike deep in his body. All that he had never dared in his coming here to think about, was instantly and completely revealed, and in this place and time, it was not only permissible, but passionately desired.

—I thought you wouldn't come, said Beulah. I sent my brothers to my uncle.

—I had to come, he said. I couldn't do nothin else but come. His mouth was dry, and he worked it to build up some wet. He said, —We'd spoke of it, and promises were made.

—You won't keep your promises, she said. Of all the kinds of men I could be with, bein with you—. Her moment of silence an indictment. She went on then not breathless, but calm, and with flat certainty. —You won't keep your promises. You won't be let to if you would, which you won't, so don't even try.

—But why?

—You're white. You're a soldier. It can't end no way but one.

—Take a chance.

—We both took more than one already.

He was trembling. Now his voice shook. —I can't help it. And I don't care how crazy it is, I can't stand another minute, not one more—.

—Stop. God, stop. Her hand sought his face. And he gathered her up in his arms, heart hammering, nostrils flared and flooded with the scent she wore. When he kneaded her back, he gloried in the shift of the cloth across her velvet skin. His hands fell to her hips. He was drunk with it, with her; and she pressed into him, aglow, all willing. The first kiss like the first fruit of harvest. Fruit all the sweeter for the crime, for the risk, the sin, the shame, the betrayal. And if he knew, at last, just what it was that he betrayed, he also knew he did not care, and betraying it was the rightest thing he could do. She pulled back a moment. An abrupt reversal that somehow was also right, imminent, proper.

Her dress loosened and fell. It lay like drapery. Her slips bunched beneath his questing hand. Her arms crept around him; they clung together. She returned his kiss, as deeply as it was given, out of desperation and the fear still deeper and the love the deepest of all, and spoken the least. That much tighter the embrace. Her mouth opened onto his ear. The knot of the drawstring of her bloomers loosened, as his coat fell off his arms, and he loosened his tie one-handed, the collar going with it; the studs clattering to the floor as he pulled open his shirt. She loosened his belt. Her lips cupped the lobe of his ear, and she whispered:

—It's only for awhile. Sweetest. Sweetest.

Into the hollow at the base of her neck, —Oh my darlin girl—.

—Come with me, she said. Come with me now.

while his hands fumbled at the catches of her long sleeved blouse; the petticoat sliding on the dark silk of her skin; his hands inside the blouse while she slipped the hook-and-eye fasteners, and neatly stepped out of the bloomers piled around her feet, the slips falling into them, a pile of satiny white, and they drift together across the small parlor, his hands stroking the velvet flesh, her hands exploring him, into a small bedroom, and tumbling onto the bed.

Such clothing as remained, scattered. They clung together in a frantic moil; an eternity, a travail of bedsprings. The heels of her feet spurred his back as he rode into her. She cried out. The sun changed its angle in the window as the light failed. In the fading autumn light, the crickets started up their plainsong chant. Until at last he cried out, too, and as much of sorrow as of joy was in the voice of each. After, in the breathless moment of aggrieved yearning for all that has slipped away so quickly, she said, perhaps more harshly than she wished:

—So how you like it with your own nigger?

and his voice caught, and he tumbled over a cliffedge, whispered:

—I love you.

and she said, falling beside him, her voice a whisper, too, aghast at the enormity.

—Jesus help us, she said. The white folks will kill us sure. I love you, too.

* * *

McAllister was hysterical. He waved his Bible in the air. It was sundown. Men were gathering from neighboring tents. Dinner, the evening meal, had been over for a good while. McAllister declaimed:

—A sleep is death's own sweet song, can't you see it? To lull you with, soft words from a woman's mouth. Whore! Seductress—.

and then he blinked. As though something clotted in his eyes; wiped his hands down his face, as though webs hung there, or veils. He said in a weepy voice:

—Are your eyes sewed shut you will not see? We'll carry on war of a madman's making! Carry it on to the madmen themselves! There do be horsemen, ridin in the smokes of battle—I've seen em! I *know*! Evil hid two thousand years, hatched out in a pool of putrid grease, the rot that feeds your own life—brothers! Over there or here, it's all the *same*, my brothers. We'll wake more than dogs—.

A voice more-or-less calm:

—Just what the hell are you doing?

—Havoc! Havoc! McAllister cried. Sufferin like in Bible days!

His buzzcut hair glistened with his sweating. His bedraggled face, deepset hollowed eyes, begged for a hearing. He cried out again:

—*This* will be called the time when God fell silent, and spoke no more, not never, no! *Never!* Out of *shame* of us. And sorrow at our sins. His face hid, in fear of what he'd made, to speak to it no more. To poor sinners. We don't *deserve* God's voice—.

and his voice dropped, to an intimate softness, as his hands curled inward to his chest,

—Poor sinners like us. Like you and me—.

The young Lieutenant stood, his hands planted on his hips in vague caricature. Something Read in a Manual on Leadership; with Particular Attention to the chapter headed Command Presence. Sergeant Mays lounged behind him, legs crossed, leaning on a tentpole, smiling with every one of his Army-whitened teeth. McAllister's mouth worked open and shut, and his one arm swung left, right, like a pendulum, the Bible the weight at its end. He had

gathered quite a little congregation, too. He made noises deep in his throat. He panted, wheezing. His utility shirt was painted with dark, wide circles of sweat; he stank. His face a sheen of orange light. He spoke again, his eyes locked on the Lieutenant, this time less frantically, with more earnestness but less energy.

—The like unseen since Bible days. And we will be all officers in the LORD'S army," his voice took on the shadow of his former power, rising; his posture straightened, —Witnesses to the world's last turning—. At the last, he seemed to speak directly to the Lieutenant. —I say unto you, my brother! Hear me! Hear me and *heed* me—.

—I ain't your brother, the Lieutenant said.

—Then whose—? Coughing weakly for a long time, a thick yellow sputum globbing *splat* in the darksome dust. The last of these filigreed with dreadful, lacey threads of blood. The Lieutenant waited for him to finish. Then said:

—You been drinking, Private?

McAllister visibly startled. He said weakly:

—No—.

and the Lieutenant gestured to Mays. Mays stepped forward. He took McAllister by one arm. He jerked his hand away, as if it had been scalded, and said:

—Jesus, Mac, you're afire—.

and Mac said:

—I speak for God—.

and Mays said:

—Sure you do.

and Mays lead McAllister away; who stumbled as he walked, and reeled, his elbow in Mays' hand. He swung at least on the hinge of his own turning. It came back to them, later, that he had the flu, the new kind of flu, a killer flu, incident in rising and alarming numbers. A day or two later, the day before Wafer was to begin an actual leave, came the new first use of the word: *epidemic*. A new quarantine clamped down on the camp. The toll of the dead was endless. It was late November, 1917. Wafer was blocked from Fort Worth, and from Beulah.

* * *

In the days that followed, from hospital to hospital deadhouse, a parade moved sluggishly. Traffic of porters, still, white, sheetcovered stretched between them. The high point of each shrouded stretched form, the tip of a nose. The morgue was a small building built of brick, thick-walled, quickly crowded. In the cold it was a deep-freeze inside. They stacked the dead, and the dead waited patiently for time. The sudden, unexpected demand for graves, for cerements, for coffins and formaldehyde overtaxed the system.

There was need for clerks to write letters of condolence, and for clerks to run the apparatus that released the bodies, orchestrating the movement of the well to sickbed to morgue to grave, and for clerks to fight the administrative battles for control of limited but needful supplies for services rendered along the route. Still other clerks fought for the services of various flavors of priest. Still other clerks kept records of the activities of all the clerks, and also, of course, in a more traditional vein, there were clerks provided who lodged blame and counter-blame for the initial unpreparedness, and of course, the many deaths. The Army disarmed death, plucked the sting right out of it, by the simple expedient of surrounding it with so much paperwork, that little thought could be spared for the people who actually died. It was a clever

plan. It didn't really work.

Weeks went past, Christmas looming in the too-near future. There were trees, and carols—the Army was big on group singing—and tons of food, and other of the usual stuff, that Wafer hadn't cared about for a very long time. His interest in Christmas was confined to the gift he bought for Beulah. The gift he desperately plotted to deliver her. He strode down the street before his tent one day, hands stuffed in his pocket, mulling bitterly his inability to see her, or even to contact her. His gift was a single glass rose, hand blown, colored in life-like tints; he bought it at Washer Brothers, just before the quarantine. It seemed to him rare, and lovely, an exotic thing, and he longed for her to have it. His breath made a largish fog before him; he panted as he paced. He paced stiffly, and Gerald shouted, and ran up behind him.

—Hey, Gerald said.

—Hey yourself.

—You want to go to the canteen? I got a little something to liven up a drink, you know.

He looked around carefully, then winked broadly, and showed a bottleneck at his open collar. Wafer shook his head. Gerald fell in step with him. He walked along in silence for a moment, then asked, —What is it?

—Nothin you'd want to hear.

Gerald said it with only a touch of bitterness: —You think I don't know.

Wafer stopped. He stared at his own toes a moment. He looked straight into Gerald's eyes, and Gerald hesitated, biting briefly at his lower lip, before he answered, —Do you truly think anyone *don't* know? Anyone at all? It ain't too big of a town. It ain't but even less big a camp. How many times you been to see her? You think you didn't get seen?

It was Wafer's turn to hesitate. He finally said, —What's it to you, anyway?

—Hell, *everybody* knows, Wafer. Everybody knew when you was all the time talkin to her at Mamie's. Nobody cares anyhow. Hell, everybody else'd like to fuck her, too, except maybe me. God knows, plenty have paid to do it.

Wafer stepped toward him. Gerald put a hand in Wafer's chest, pushed. —*Watch* it, now. Let's don't get too personal. I told you, you know, *I* don't want to fuck her.

—You got a really sad fondness for the use of that word, did you know it? Wafer said it hard, biting off the words like blows: —Just white women for you. Eh, Gerald?

Gerald actually jumped with shock. Anger, resentment, and hurt warred in his face momentarily. Wafer's face was rigid, and cold, though his voice was reedier than he wanted, his throat drier, his manner less calm. It came to him suddenly, and with a shock, that he was actually afraid of Gerald. It came to him also that it didn't *matter* if he was afraid, that he would fight anyway. He yearned for a fight with Gerald, as he yearned for a night with Beulah.

—I *might* make an exception, Gerald said. He held up both hands, shushing Wafer back when he bridled. —Be calm, hoss. Be calm.

They stood staring at one another. Wafer looked down. His mouth was clamped on his anger, and the fear that threatened to consume . . . world, Gerald, Wafer, all. Gerald rolled his eyes, exasperated, put out a hand, and said, —Look, come on and have a drink.

—I've got to see her.

—You've got to have a court martial. We're *quarantined*, remember?

—You never minded stretchin a rule before.

—They never enforced them thisaway before. It never was this important.

—I've got to see her.

—You don't.

—I've got to. I can't help it.

—Good Christ. It ain't that hard to sneak out. Happens all the time. But just about all that have done it have got caught, and *if* you get caught—.

—I've got to see her.

Gerald shook his head slowly. He said wonderingly, —Ain't *you* the calm one? Ain't *you* the mature one? What the hell's the matter with you? *Corporal* Roberts.

Wafer didn't answer. And Gerald knew anyway.

—Well what can you do, Hoss? Gerald asked. He stared off down the street a silent moment. He looked Wafer full in the face. He said, —You better settle down. You better settle down and act like a white man, is what you better do.

—I've got to see her.

—Christ, man. Gerald waved his arms in exasperation. —All this, he said. You know? All this, for a *nigger*.

He punched Gerald once in the face. Gerald fell in the graveled roadway, and leaned back on his hands, staring up at his friend, less injured than offended. Other soldiers were watching from up the road. Gerald climbed slowly to his feet. He stood a few feet away, fingering his jaw. A modest drip of blood came from his lip. He said at last:

—You're on your own, pal.

and walked away.

* * *

That Saturday, Wafer changed his clothes in the scrub wood, right beside the Benbrook road. He left his utilities rolled up and jammed in the crotch of a tree. He walked as fast as he could to the streetcar stand on Arlington Heights—or Camp Bowie, as they'd recently renamed it—and waited tapping his foot impatiently. He wore his service brogans; they were polished like no shoe he'd ever worn, before he came here. The streetcar arrived. Along with the few other people there, he helped to turn it on the track-end turntable—the camp was the end of the line. In the streetcar, he sat the board seat. People boarded it and left, boarded and left. He sat near the front. Never moving, nor speaking to anyone, he rode through to downtown. He walked across to the southern line, boarded a new car, and was on his way to Stop Six. He sat near the front of the car on this leg, too; and never spoke or moved. People boarded and left, boarded and left. Each stop nearer Stop Six, black people predominated more and more.

Most everyone remaining piled out at Stop Six. Wafer got up himself, and before the car had quite stopped moving, swung off onto Rosedale Street. From the stop, he walked a few blocks more down Rosedale. On Saturday, of course, there were others out and about, and here, they were almost all black, and far more of them than ever on his trips this way before. As if Beulah had specified times of low traffic. He found he was not surprised at this. Somewhere close, a piano played accompaniment to Gospel music. He walked fast down the uncurbed, intermittent sidewalk. An older man stopped him abruptly, with a hand to his shoulder. Wafer shrugged it off, angrier than he ought to be, surprised and confused anew by his anger, in his fear almost snarling at the man. And the man removed his hat and stepped back. He stood at the edge of the road itself.

—I've seen you here afore, the man said. He did not meet Wafer's eyes.

—What of it?

—Why are you here, sir?

—I come to see a friend.

—No, sir. You come to see your whore. The man raised his eyes; they bored into Wafer's own. He said, —You bringin trouble on yourself. You bringin trouble on us all.

Wafer stepped up to him and shoved him roughly aside, stalking down the dirt track that served for a sidewalk. The man stumbled, dropped to one knee in the weeds. Wafer said over his shoulder:

—You watch it, old man.

and fled onward. He kept his eyes down; the people he passed were only stepping feet, not people, not watching him resentfully, how could they know? Before he raised his head for more than a glance, he was walking up to Beulah's house.

He stopped short at the edge of her yard. A lot of people were on the small porch, more than he would have thought it could hold. They were older men and women, seven or eight of them in all, he thought. When they saw him, the women rose in a body, and filed inside. Several flashed Wafer angry looks; several looked everywhere and anywhere they could, *except* at Wafer. He wondered who they were. There were two older men and one young man left on the porch. The young man's skin was a shining jet black; he stood at the top of the stairs. His eye contact with Wafer was direct and unflinching. Wafer stood in the street for a moment, staring up at him. The two other black men stood behind him. There was a truly old man, with eyes like yellowed ivory, and a full gray beard. Wafer started up to the porch, crossing the lawn. The youngest man started down the steps to meet him.

The oldest man said in a scratchy voice, —You be careful, Morgan.

—I will, the young man said over his shoulder. He reached a point on the sidewalk, and stopped. He stood with his hands clasped at his belt, sober-looking in a black suit and tie. Now he looked away from Wafer's eyes. While they spoke he kept them averted, save for one lone flicker, as Wafer stepped up to him, and stopped.

—I come to see Beulah, he said.

—She's took sick, the young man said.

Wafer digested that momentarily. His jaw set. He said, —I need to see her. If she's sick I just need it more.

—No, sir.

Wafer stared at the downturned face, willing it to rise and meet him eye-to-eye. It did not. Wafer locked his own eyes on a point on the man's left cheek. He snarled more harshly than he intended, —Best step aside, boy.

—You ain't comin in, the young man said. He said it quietly, and with absolute conviction. The anger was ready in his heart, and Wafer let it flower. He shouldered past the man abruptly, shouting:

—Get out of my way, boy.

and the young man's fist lashed out, and snapped Wafer's head backward. Surprise complete, Wafer spun with the impact, but gathered up his balance, as he had been trained to do, and used the momentum to propel his own swing. His own fist crashed into the side of the young man's head, and he said mechanically, as if by rote:

—Damn *nigger*—.

—God damn cracker, the young man cried. God *damn* doggie bastard.

and they pounded one another. The men poured in a gush off the porch. They pulled the two apart, and the old man interposed between them, his back to Wafer. Wafer said:

—Stop. God, please, stop—.

and it came out a whisper he could barely hear himself, and it did not stop anyone. He hit the man again, very hard, swinging wide to get around the interposing bodies. His throat was dry, painfully dry.

The old man with the scratchy voice said:

—Morgan. Morgan, you know this'll come to no good—.

—You used her up, the young man shouted at Wafer. Agonized:

—Let them take their *own* women—.

his voice was like ragged weeping. He tore his words from his heart, that Wafer hadn't credited him with possessing. And when he lunged for Wafer again, the scratchy-voiced old man grabbed him in a bear hug, though he staggered with the young man's power. Wafer struggled free of the lightly restraining hands of the other two, and started back up the walk. He shouted:

—You just don't understand. Don't none of you understand a thing—.

and the old man said:

—Stop there.

and his voice was anguished.

—I'm beggin you, Mister, leave us in peace. Stop there—.

and Morgan, the young man, fought free of the old man, and charged down the sidewalk. He raged as he came:

—You white *bastard*—.

and the old man cried:

—Mister I'm beggin you—.

Wafer couldn't say just where the police came from. Suddenly, they were there. Men in double-breasted blue cotton uniform tunics, buttons of gold, conspicuous gold badges on the right breast pocket, peaked watch hats set tight and straight on their heads, blazoned with other shields. Morgan grappled with Wafer, just short of the porch. He grated:

—What would she be to you?

and gripping Wafer by a lapel, slung him with it. Hissed:

—Where would you be with her, in a month's time? A *year*—?

and Wafer saw the nightstick, before he knew what it was. Morgan howled:

—You couldn't never give her *nothin*.

and his warm breath bathing Wafer's face. Morgan's face like a weeping clown's mask.

—She couldn't never *be* nothin, nothin but your whore—.

and the nightstick rapped twice on Morgan's skull.

—Settle down, nigger, a new voice said calmly. A policeman. Morgan's mouth opened wide at the first rap. At the second, his eyes filled up with blood.

—Please, sir, please, officer, the old man said.

Morgan staggered away from Wafer. The blood filled his hair and dripped down his neck, and splattered when he shook his head. It splattered Wafer. The second policeman smacked the old man, in the shoulder with the tip of his stick. He was still pleading. At the blow, he yipped in astonishment. The second policeman said, —Back off, there, nigger—.

Wafer said, —Wait!

—You all right? the first Policeman asked him.

A rock bounced on the sidewalk. Another rock smashed into Wafer's already bleeding mouth, and his legs dropped from under him. A rock struck the second policeman in the thigh. He cried out inanely, —Hey!

The other two black men, the two who hadn't spoken, walked backwards up the sidewalk. They shepherded Morgan and the old man onto the porch. Morgan reeled—the blood poured out of his nose and ears and the cuts on his scalp, more of it and faster than seemed possible. Its dripping wrote like words across the white sidewalk, and up the steps of the porch. One of the mute men found his voice, and shouted at Wafer, —You got no bidness here. You hadn't no call to hurt that girl—.

Wafer's agonized shout:

—I love her—!

made no difference to anyone.

A brick smashed on the concrete sidewalk beside him. Chips flew, stinging across his cheek. Across the way, a gaggle of black boys, not much more than children, picked up rock after rock and chucked them at Wafer and the policemen. The policemen were bent over wincing, like men ducking wind-blown rain. Rocks bounced on the Model T parked in the street. Lettering on the doors in white—FORT WORTH POLICE DEPARTMENT—seemed to come in for a lot of missiles. Finally, one of the policemen unholstered his pistol, and fired four times in the air. In seconds, the street was deserted. The porch of the house where Wafer had loved Beulah stood empty, its windows dark and silent. Wafer sat on the sidewalk, stunned, his

suitcoat torn at the lapel, the knee out on one leg of the pants, his shirt and four-in-hand soaked with the blood that ran from his mouth and his nose.

—What's your name, buddy? the first policeman asked him.

Wafer told him.

—That's him, said the other.

* * *

Wafer wiped at the blood dried around his nose and mouth. The blood crinkled. He looked around bleakly at his cell. He looked at the turnkey. The turnkey was a round-bodied man, red-faced, a balding head, his face frozen in a permanent leer. His voice sounded as if phlegm bubbled always in his chest and the back of his throat. The policeman who had brought Wafer here, and squired him through the booking process—the second policeman at the Stop Six fiasco—stood by with a smirk. The turnkey was short of breath, and his face was red.

Wafer jerked his chin at him. He asked, —What happens now?

—Provost gets you, boy, the turnkey said. He shook his head grinning. He was catching his breath and the red was fading from his face.

The cop also shook his head, in mock sorrow, tut-tutting into his collar. He said, —You ought to've had better sense, boy.

—We'd heard about you, the turnkey said.

The policeman said, —We didn't know it was you when we got there, but we'd heard about you. From Mamie and her whores. From the niggers. Lot of people have took an interest in you.

—What niggers?

—Now, I ain't gonna tell you that.

—Maybe the one you killed?

The cop's stare hardened and he said nothing. Oblivious, the turnkey ostentatiously twirled his keyring, and said rhetorically, —So. You're the one with that pretty little yellow whore from Mamie's.

—Yeah, said Wafer. That's me.

The cop regarded him less than benignly through the bars. He said, —You know, you best watch out the things you say. The provost ain't here yet.

The turnkey shook his head, as if he were puzzled by a knotty problem. —Ain't you a study, he said. Why the hell'd you go AWOL? You *are* a study. He shook his head in wonderment. — I can see it over some good pussy, just maybe, but *nigger* pussy?

—There may just be a thing or two that you can't see, you think? Wafer said tiredly.

The turnkey's face reddened anew. He said in a hard voice, made ridiculous by the renewed wheeze and gurgle, —Don't get smart.

—That possibility ain't much a problem for you, is it?

The broad face reddened more deeply. He said in a voice still harder, —Lucky for you the Provost likes his goods unbruised.

The cop said, —We can fix him where the bruises don't show.

—How about it, soldier boy? Want to have a party?

—Just let me sleep, Wafer said.

—Just a dumb doggie, said the turnkey to the policeman. His face and breath were easing.

The cop said to Wafer, —See what comes of fuckin niggers?

Turnkey and policeman waited for a response. The policeman caressed the end of his billy club. When no response came, they left him. Policeman and turnkey laughed softly between themselves. Their footsteps echoed down the hall. The turnkey waddled like a duck when he walked, his round midbody held up by legs bent backward at the knee. He called back in his bubbly voice:

—Man, for your sake, I hope that was *really* good tail.

And the nasal laughter mocked him and the slam of the door was like a judgement, and the rattle of the keys like the laughter of God. When he was sure he was alone, he wept softly.

* * *

At least the Provost's men were silent, and arrived quickly. They took him to the camp, and through the camp, and put him in a bare, Spartan cell in the stockade. He could see through the barred window a barren patch of dead grass, a leaden sky. He could have wept, and in the night his body yearned for his lost love, and in the day his heart broke over and over at the thought of her. Or so he thought of it, the constant sense of agonized suffering, the hollow place where his heart had been. He lay in the cell for days. They offered him food, and later they took it away, untouched. They offered him the chance at exercise, and he lay on the cot unmoving, and stared at the wall. He lost a little weight, and then he lost a lot of weight. He was warned: the day would come they would force him to eat, and prod him at gunpoint into the yard. He did not care.

His dreams were garish.

They bled over into his waking, strange playlets, mum shows acted by phantoms on a

blank wall. There was a bearded man, nameless, by a well who worked the pump, and clear cold water spurted over his hand. He raised it to his mouth to drink. He wore a duster, as a cowhand does. His beard was the color of his coat, his flesh leached gray, his eyes vague in shadow, a cold and bloodless man in a suit some color Wafer had never seen, a gray like the ash of a fire; less gray than black; but neither, like no color at all. A bird dragging its wings in dust.

He pumped at the pump with his left hand. The water gushed cold and clear in the palm of his hand. It was a barnyard he stood in, in the sunlight. The sharp smell of horse piss, sharper smell of mules; the pungent hard whiff of cattle, lowing in the dusk-light that was there, mincing dainty of hoof in the mud by the tank, heads lowered to drink. Nothing else, save the man.

—And why do you draw the water? he asked the dust man. Isn't it for thirst?

—I ever drew it, the dust man said back. His eyes were darker than the shadow that held them. He said, —Not one of you is anything, save my hand, when it smites you.

—I will hit you back.

—Do.

A smile. And bad teeth.

—I smite you even now, while you can do nothing. There is only the silence left, after all your long, long speech, and silence, in between the words you say, has more of truth than you or they will ever know. I do not say more than *I* will ever know. His eyes glowed. The cell disappeared. Vague phosphor halo in the dusk. —But *you* will say the words as if they matter.

Just as well that in those first days no one came to see him.

* * *

They came one evening, a day or so after he had at last begun to eat, and told him he

would see the executive officer tomorrow morning. They left a clean uniform. They left a greatcoat he could wear along the way. It was a cold winter, a winter where thousands died of flu, a scale of death unseen since the days of the Black Plague. Perhaps that was the reason they did not courts-martial him. But he stayed in the stockade through the first week of January, on Company punishment. He was there for Christmas, and to welcome in 1918. The quarantine was lifted the week before Christmas. Inside, the days simply flowed, each into the next. He had been two weeks inside, his interview with exec and commander alike behind him, when he looked up one day and saw Gerald standing at the cell bars. Gerald smiled, and shook his head. He sat on the floor by the bars. Wafer walked to the bars and Gerald said, —So how you doin?

—I'm all right, Wafer answered. He saw the corporal's stripes on Gerald's sleeves, and made no comment; nor did Gerald comment on the absence of them on his own. He sat down on his side of the bars. —You?

—I bet better than you.

—How would you know? It might be real soft in here.

Gerald shook his head. —Maybe. But the trainin's supposed to get rough in the spring. They're goin to want us all. The Lieutenant's getting you out sometime this month.

—Yeah? What month is it?

—It's still January, and you know it. Quit bein dramatic.

—Yeah? Well. He's getting soft, the Lieutenant is. McAllister convert him or somethin?

—No. But he did live through the flu.

—McAllister or the Lieutenant?

—McAllister. The Lieutenant, too, for that matter. They say the death rate drops a little every day. The sanitation fatigues will drive you crazy.

—We got em in here, too.

—Yeah. But listen, I got some things to tell you.

—So tell me.

—First off, hoss, I'm goin to forget you hit me, Gerald said. He passed a pack of tobacco and papers through the bars. Wafer nodded his thanks and rolled one while Gerald watched. He stuck it in his mouth, and wiggled his eyebrows. Gerald struck a match.

—You had it comin, Wafer said, as he puffed the cigarette alight.

—You're makin it awful hard to be your friend.

—Tell me what you got to tell me.

—Your cousin? The one what's in oil?

—Yeah?

—He sent some money for you. Sent it to *me*, direct, can you believe it? How'd he know to do that?

—He's a smart bastard.

—Yeah. You want it?

Wafer shook his head. —Send it back.

Gerald nodded. —I figured.

—All right. Go on.

—The other thing ain't good.

—I get lots of good news in here, said Wafer. Come on. Spill it.

—Wafer, this is bad.

He grimaced, pressing his face on the cold bars. He said, as forcefully as he could, —*Tell* me. Tell me now.

—That girl of yours.

—Who? Beulah? His stomach turned over, and turned to ice. Gerald nodded.

—Go on, Wafer said.

—She's dead, Gerald said. The flu got her. She was sick the day you went over there.

Wafer never made a sound, and Gerald never prodded him. The cigarette went out in Wafer's hand. He never heard Gerald leave, but when he looked up, some while later, he was gone. He had left the tobacco.

Wafer sat just as he was, all that night, and much of the next day.

PART THREE

1918

In Johnstown, in Pennsylvania, early in June, watching from one of what had come to seem an endless succession of troop trains, Wafer saw a cemetery, whose gate was done up in a pile of black granite, Egyptian in its massiveness. From this gate, in a frenzy of patriotic wit, some fool had hung a banner. It was posted such that it faced the track across a road. It was not clear, however, at whom the injunction was directed. Perhaps at the passing soldiers; or perhaps at others, asleep on the far side of those dark, hulking gateposts. You could see the flags on the green hill, the rows and rows of headstones. The angels that crowned that gate might well have had batwings, so dark they were. Perhaps it had been a mistake. In red letters, the sign read:

WAKE UP! YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU!

Hundreds of small towns, hundreds of hastily constructed camps, had seen the beginnings of those journeys. Wafer and his cohorts had begun their own, directly after the division had made a parade down Fort Worth's Main Street. That was a parade repeated elsewhere, on other Main Streets. Those followed, too, by train rides just like this one. Wafer thought of his small-scale sendoff from Perrin, that seemed an age ago. Time and scale had mushroomed; stakes would rise, too, very shortly indeed. The 36th Division was headed for France.

The train was crowded; there were no cushions on the seats; it was hot, at least until they left the South; the car stank of tobacco and unwashed bodies and overfull privies and overfull spittoons. There was a poker game at one end that had begun while passing through Johnson's Station, between Fort Worth and Dallas and a crapshoot at the other that had begun in Dallas. Neither game ever wholly stopped, though they did pause, when an officer wandered through.

Sometimes there were brief fights. These were also concealed from the officers, all present colluding in the deception.

No matter. At each successive town, there was always a bootlegger selling moonshine on the platform, guaranteed to blow the eyes from your sockets, if not to inflict permanent neurological damage; that and motion sickness ensured that the sickly odor of vomit followed them all the way across the country. There was also a whore or two, almost everywhere, offering a quickie, wherever a reasonably flat surface and minimal privacy afforded. All the normal risks were involved in that, though seldom a pimp and never a bouncer. Other forms of entertainment offered, too. More often than not, each town offered some sort of celebration, plied them with food and drink, wished them well, and godspeed, and kill some for me.

The first town of any size had been Texarkana, where they pulled up to the station in a great white soft cloud of steam at first shrouding platform and locomotive from view altogether. The locomotive blew a series of hoots, short-long-longer, and more white billows of steam frothed from underneath; the slam of the brakes all taking hold; a metallic shriek and the cars lurching sequentially backward. There were flags, and bunting, and some kind of crowd, cheering and waving. When the train came to a full halt, the cars of the enlisted men did not quite make the platform. The front cars did, the ones with the officers. Wafer leaned out the window, craning to watch as the train eased up to a small red brick station house. Music started from somewhere—off-key, the musicians a little out of time. Red Cross women on the platform in white summer dresses, white hats, and red and blue sashes, at white-clothed tables each with a freight of sandwiches, coffee, cake. After the officers, the men feasted. After Texarkana, the Texas troops were clean out of Texas—that, of course, the reason for the big send-off in the first

place.

They ended that long train ride at last, all the way up into New York City, only to be herded immediately aboard a ferry named the Susquehanna, which chugged past the cast iron bridge they had already ridden across on the train an hour before, out to an island in New York Harbor, sandy and nameless. They disembarked at a dour, flyblown tent city called Camp Mills. New York was a city that Wafer had been taught from birth to equate with all the sins of Sodom, and a few more besides—an earthly abode of demons. They lingered there for a week; many of the men visited Coney Island and other such famous places. Divisional VD rates remained quite steady, to no one's surprise.

* * *

They hadn't time to get in much trouble; they were taken across the same rail bridge again, this time in yellow freight cars, to the docks of the Port of New York, where they boarded a steamer. It loomed above the dock like Mount Sinai, a broad black hull giving way to a towering white superstructure; it didn't seem possible that men had built such a monstrous thing. On the stern, the name in huge white letters--EL PEÑOR. They filed aboard, up a gangplank, an endless line of men in olive-drab, each with a full kit, helmet hanging off pack, Springfield in hand, past a man seated at a desk. They could see other lines, boarding up other planks, further down the hull. They stated their names, last name, first name, middle initial, ASN. A clerk checked them off the list. They filed up the gangplank, past the bored clerks, past officers at desks, across the decks, and descended at last, the same long line, endlessly into the bowels of the ship.

The boy Martin from Mineral Wells said in awe, —It's like we was goin into a tomb,

ain't it?

—Shut up, said Gerald.

—That's a hell of a thing to say, someone else said.

Down the line someone shouted, —We're in it now for the AEF.

—Dry up that shit, shouted Mays. He was much nearer than Wafer had realized, and he looked around. There he was. Wafer stared at him a little harder, a little more intensely than he'd meant to, with a little more naked dislike than ordinarily. Mays stared back with hard black eyes, and smiled bleakly. The boy Martin from Mineral Wells muttered an embarrassed apology at large, and they all slunk on downward, downward, as the pathway goes, into the cavernous bowels of the rocking, vastly rocking ship. It was cool on the gangplank and the deck; it warmed as they descended.

Wafer trooped with the rest, down and down. Someone said his name:

—*Roberts*—.

and he ignored it, hoping whoever it was would go away. But they said it again, and he looked around, and it was Mays, with his hard unfriendly smile, and Wafer asked, as neutrally as he could manage:

—What was that, Sergeant?

—You ain't never got a thing to say, have you, Roberts?

smiling still more widely, broadly, unpleasantly, with his Army-whitened teeth. He went on:

—I ain't heard you say ten words since I first saw you at camp, but you been more trouble than just about anyone we didn't get rid of altogether.

Mays gestured at Gerald:

—You got even less to say than Geronimo here. You savin it up for your memoirs? Or you just got a limited vocabulary?

—No, Wafer said slowly. And paused. Then he added, —It's just I'm particular who I pass my time with.

Mays laughed uproariously at that.

—So I hear, he said. So I hear.

Wafer found himself in a wooden partition with a shelf bunk, just barely long enough to lay on. Under it, he wedged his bulky pack and bedroll. He stuck his head into the passageway. A line of men. He squeezed past them, to the end of it, and looked up the way he had come. There, a distant, postage-stamp-sized patch of sky, from whence the endless downcast line filed stiffly down. Ramp upon ramp of stairs and ladders, ever deeper into the boat. Down and down and down, where the heat lay locked like a haunt within the paint-peeled metal. The loading kept up for a long time. Days. All of that day, and the next, and much of the next. When the ship warped out from the pier, pushed by a tugboat dwarfed in its shadow, they were many of them milling about the deck, Wafer among them, and Gerald nearby.

Someone shouted from the rail and pointed, and there, low in the water, was the Susquehanna, the ferry that had carried them to the nameless, sandy island of Camp Mills. There were men of another division on board, shouting at them and waving, probably headed to fill the very Camp Mills bunks they had themselves just vacated. These men gestured and cheered, pumped their arms lustily, cavorted and hooted and waved their caps, as if in solidarity or encouragement. Wafer, and the others with him on the El Peñor, stood stolidly at the rail, watching the other ship out of sight, talking among themselves, but making no demonstration.

They had become suddenly somber, afloat on all this water, and a vaster expanse ahead. They were different now from the ones left behind; they would become more different still. When they were ordered below, they passed down subdued.

They were not allowed back up until the Statue of Liberty was receding in their wake, and behind it a smoky haze: America. As if a thousand fires burned there, whole forests ablaze to obscure purpose. The haze slowly faded. The crossing took two weeks. Most of the way, Wafer was dog-sick, while Gerald seemed impervious. The smell of urine, vomit, shit, were everywhere, not a little of them Wafer's own. The dreadful error he had made in coming here: would it now bear fruit darker still? He had never written home—not to the Robertses, or to the Sweets. He did not write home now. He kept to himself, talking little even to Gerald. Nights were worse: the great ship bearing them lightly over the water, weightless like ghosts. He slept as much as he could. It wasn't much.

Violently passionate remembrances of Beulah awoke him, startled, in his own wetness. Sweet, gentle woman, whose touch was magic. Dead and gone a madness in him, that would no more be denied than God. He awoke at other times nauseous, choking in the dark, bile burning in his throat, in terror of everything behind him, everything ahead of him, everything confronting him. And tears anew, in dubious consolation, at the thought of dark, velvet skin; sweet, tender mouth. His blissfully rampant penis became a reproach to him, an affliction, and a temptation. He gripped it hard sometimes, willing it to slack in his hand. Other times he masturbated, and he certainly was not alone in that. Around him, every night, the inevitable groan of someone, equally alone and yearning, masturbating quietly. In the morning, the jokes of starched sheets, and endless talk of women. It was even whispered that some used *other* means to cope. As to

that, Wafer was incurious. But Gerald was learning French. He said grinning:

—Voo-lay voo couch ay vek mwa—?

and laughed and laughed. Clasped his hands to his heart, looking up at Wafer with moon eyes—.

—Jay ta *door*—.

and laughed and laughed some more. The approach of combat seemed a tonic for Gerald.

They arrived in France in July.

There was more training.

* * *

The lot of them sprawled by the roadside. Wafer had shouldered out of his pack, and dumped it, and now he sprawled with the pack as a backrest, and his helmet shading his eyes; Gerald likewise beside him. It was August, hot, and they were on break. They smoked, sweated, or napped—one of the most amazing things (to Wafer) would always be the conditions under which you could take a nap, when you were tired enough—waiting for the word from On High to saddle up and move out. This latest excursion was one in a seemingly endless series. They called them conditioning marches. The breaks themselves were heartbreakingly finite, the mere punctuation of an endless walk. The frog officers had told the *real* officers that all of this was absolutely essential—*es-sent-shal absoloo*. The one or two limey officers they had, had said it, too. God damn them every one.

In course of these *essential* conditioning marches, they had all become more intimate with France than anyone could ever before have dreamed possible. More intimate than Wafer had *ever* been, with any aspect of Texas, much less the rest of the U.S. Because, for an alarming plurality of any given day, they were actually *coated* with France, head to foot—with its sacred soil, of

which he had heard so much—in all its gritty, choking glory. They had been here less than two months. They were quartered in Bar-sur-Aube, a whitewashed, medium-sized village, of stone and tile and thatch, in a region called the Champagne. He knew what champagne was—wine; but he'd never associated that with this chalky, choking dust.

A French officer walked past, slowly, as if on a promenade. He was just as dusty as Wafer, but somehow looked fresher. He was deep in conversation, with a Captain Wafer didn't recognize. The words were nonsense to him, like Gerald cursing in Comanch, as he seemed to do so much of here of late. Seemed actually to favor it over what had been his customary English. He said it was more "effective," whatever the hell *that* meant. It was gobbledygook to Wafer, just like French. The two officers jabbered blithely. Wafer listened, and did not understand. It sounded like:

—Donk. Vooz avay lentenchon demploy**ay**—.

and a load of other crap, answered with:

—Wee. On a dis cootay chaw.

like a lengthy headache. Wafer grimaced. The American officer hesitated. He pronounced the words a little differently, but went on gamely. Whatever the hell it was all about. The American got in is two cents, the lucky guy. Wafer recognized one word—*Choctaw*. They sure seemed to think it was all real important. They stood just by Wafer and Gerald. The American had his thumbs hooked in his Sam Browne; the Frenchmen his hands clasped behind his back. They nodded, grave with one another, careful of decorum, like two priests debating scriptural arcana. The Frenchman shook his head, and said, in weighty tones, something like:

—Esparay awns ben kay General Foch ay General Pershing nay say trom on pah.

and the two walked on; Wafer let them pass from his field of view without the effort of turning his head. Gerald chuckled. He said:

—They're gonna use Choctaws for telephone codes. You hear?

and a cloud passed across the sun; the sigh down the line was very definite; and the groan when the sun reappeared, more definite still. Wafer nodded to Gerald, and said, —Yeah. Sure.

Wafer heard singing. He frowned, confused. It was coming from further up the road. With as little movement as possible, he turned his head. Up the road, other men marching toward them. Black wriggling shapes on the white road, writhing in the heat. He knew right away, by their voices, that they were American, and black; they sang or chanted while they marched, or some combination of song and chant. A white non-com accompanied them. Up the column someone shouted:

—Gettin mighty dark out—!

there was scattered laughter. The blacks carried shovels on their shoulders. Streaked with the gray-to-white mud of the Champagne. Several bandaged, from wounds or injuries. As they approached, they dressed their lines; the shovels were angled with new precision.

—Oh, *hell*, someone else shouted. It's a bunch of *niggers*—.

And another: —I *thought* I smelled somethin—.

and the singing stopped. But the catcalls went on. The taunters were relatively few, but made their presence known disproportionately. Some stood up, the better to taunt:

—You niggers get that latrine finished—?

—It's the *circus*—.

—Naw. It's the *zoo*—.

though not everyone participated. Some stayed as they were, sprawled, sullen, exhausted, or simply uninterested in idle torment. A few were offended, who said so only to be themselves catcalled. The officers, if they did not laugh themselves, easily ignored it all. The white non-com in charge of the detail turned bright red. He marched with his eyes on the ground.

—Hell of a rifle you got their, nigger—.

—Hey, boy! Gimme a shoeshine—.

—Make mine neat with a water chaser, hey—?

until the blacks started singing again. A black non-com in ranks sang the lines and the men sang them back and it sounded to Wafer like some macabre echo of songs he once heard from Hattie, in the kitchen. They sang all the way down the length of the brigade column, and no one moved to stop them, and the catcalls slowly fell to silence. They sang:

—I got a grave diggin feelin in my heart.
I got a grave diggin feelin in my heart.
Everbody die in the A.E.F.
Only one buryin squad got left.
I got a grave diggin feelin in my heart—.

in mournful resonance. Then they were gone. The non-coms moved down the line, kicking and cajoling; and the men rose, formed into ranks, and marched again.

They marched for a long while. Until dusk was approaching. They rounded a curve of road, just past a rock farmhouse. In the yard, while the troops shuffled past, geese hissed in mindless, misdirected fury at the cloud of dust, the men raising more of it and still more, to plague geese and men alike. An old woman sat near the house by the door; an old man walked from a ramshackle barn or shed or henhouse—so hard to *tell* over here, it was all so different—suspiciously eyeing the troops, probably concerned about his geese. It occurred to Wafer, as it

had more than once, that they never saw young girls when they saw French families, though whores were more than abundant in even the smallest towns. At least, the VD rates held steady, when they didn't climb. Gerald cursed in a steady monotone—or Wafer assumed it was cursing, since it wasn't English. It was the moment of dusk. Wafer saw a second white stone building, thatch-roofed, ahead beside the road. They rounded a second curve; it curved a third time, around a hill in front of them; that was where the building was. He didn't see any people there. Not at first. The column was broached in a triple curve of the road.

An enormous noise and a flash, so shockingly intense that some of the men in the column cried out in fear. All flinched away from the lash of that light and noise; there was abruptly the stench of cordite, and a haze of smoke drifting across the road. Wafer saw, beyond the next bend of the road, sheltered by netting, a battery of French guns, and beside it an American battery. The white building sheltered them. The failing light had obscured the guns to the approaching column. Officers ran up and down the road's shoulder. The men milled confusedly. One of the froggies walked fast beside the Captain toward the head of the column. The frog seemed to be explaining something, since the Captain nodded, and nodded again. Non-coms moved through the moil of the men, slapping them back into rank and file. The blue of the evening rang with curses, when the other five cannon of the French battery went off, one after another. They were long-range guns, 155s.

Gerald said from the side of his mouth, —These are the heavies.

That was the name for the biggest guns. Wafer nodded slightly in acknowledgement.

They were like the wrath of God. Each time they fired, a long flail of fire punished the grass. A roll of smoke, backlit by the setting sun. Each round followed by another. And

another. The ground trembled. And another. Dust leapt off the sandbagged gun bays and the road itself at each enormous concussion. The men were standing in ranks now, still at attention. They all seemed pleased with themselves, for calming down so quickly. And at that moment, the six-gun battery of American 155s salvoed somewhat raggedly in its turn, all six guns firing almost at once. The noise tremendous, oppressive, weighty; like a fist that slammed the floor in frustration and rage. Away over the hills, salvoed other batteries, in like succession, as if a hellish orchestration had been composed for the occasion. From where he stood in ranks, Wafer could see McAllister. His lips were moving and his eyes were closed.

The men who worked the guns, worked frantically, all a-jumble in a mess, a chaotic confluence of men and instruments and implements; they were all black with powder and grease. About them empty casings were scattered; drums of fuel, coils of rope, shattered wood boxing, cables with clamped loops at the end, oddments of clevis and hook and grapple, lengths of pipe and chain in disordered piles, an expedient backwash of industrial debris. The men were like novitiates or acolytes of the guns, in service of a new order of worship. In one tent a lamp glowed; there, amid all the scholarly arcana of an infernal art, the officers bent over maps, and made calculations, and plotted co-ordinants, and wrote orders. One officer seemed to be calling off figures as each gun successively fired, and non-coms calling off adjustments to each gun.

It was almost dark. Wafer's company stood in the road, the officers pacing with the advisors. The Captain spoke to Mays, and Mays barked a command. The company stood at ease. The other outfits followed suit, while the batteries, close and distant and all around them, salvoed time and again in the waning light, muzzle flashes brightening the dark, the thin hazy smoke—mindful of observation—illuminating but briefly.

Gerald muttered, —They did this on purpose.

Wafer whispered back to him, —What do you mean?

—I mean they brought us just here just now to get us used to all this. So we expect it.

—We're goin into line, see? a voice hissed.

Gerald turned his head slowly. Sergeant Mays was standing beside them.

—We'll have Froggies north and south of us, he went on. But we're goin into line.

—When? Gerald asked.

—Soon.

And Mays, with his terrible white teeth, smiled.

* * *

They were inspected, several times in succession. They were deloused, several times in succession. They were issued shotguns in late September, two to a section. Sleek things, Brownings, with extended tubular magazines. They were issued speed-loaders. You could carry eight rounds, seven in the magazine and one chambered. The issue loads were double-ought buck. They were given to the bigger men, so Wafer didn't get one. He traded for a revolver, and carried that, holstered, in addition to his Springfield. They entered a cool, rainy Autumn, a sky gray like smoke, weeping constantly, that threatened as deadly a winter as the year before.

And then they were moved.

They were loaded first into tiny toy railcars, and shunted to a small, fallen-down station sheltered by a ridge to its east. In black paint, driplines tracing from the stenciled letters, the railcar said:

8 CHEVAUX 40 HOMMES.

which meant, someone said, 8 horses or 40 men. They were packed in elbow to elbow. Wafer didn't count, but it seemed to him a great deal more than 40 each. It seemed a long, boring, uncomfortable ride. They offloaded, and formed up on the shoulder of the road next to the tracks. There was no station there. The road was far more shell-damaged and weather-worn than any they had yet seen. The rain came down, not hard, but steady and miserable. They marched down the road beside the tracks, and the road took them into a town. In the town, there was a station. The sign, peeling and splintered, and hanging by one corner, said: EPERNAY. Wafer didn't know how to pronounce it.

Filthy people in the town, dressed in rags, skeletal men and their sagging, exhausted women, hovering about the column, dour and gaunt. They called out to the soldiers, but Wafer couldn't understand a word. Every time he saw French people, he felt like a man wrapped in cotton or gauze: no contact with the outside. For two days, they marched, camped, ate evening and morning—corned beef—and marched some more. Now, it rained intermittently in earnest, misery pouring from the sky in sheets; then it merely misted, until it rained again. Eventually, they were loaded into trucks, a mixed bag of Fiats and Fords. The trucks took them south. They dried their socks and chafed their feet back to life and scraped the heavy gray mud off their boots.

Whenever the trucks stopped, the officers ranged up and down the column, checking on the men. A couple of the French officers were still with them, and a single morose limey with a handlebar moustache, like Deadeye Dick at the movies. He often waved around a heavy pistol, a giant thing with a ring mounted on the butt and a leather lanyard that ran to the limey's belt. Approaching a village, civilians lined the roads, waving at the trucks and the Americans in them, hawking food, and liquor, and once a woman. There were fewer and fewer people, *especially*

women. Impoverished, ragged, suffering people, vendor and pimp and whore alike. What a terrible place to have a woman, he thought. The Army always had believed in clean living. Wafer didn't care much any more, one way or the other, but he passed on the whore. It was certain that the rest of the division had never been so limited in contacts with civilians, as it had in the past week or two. Not that it made much difference: the VD rolls never declined even slightly. The Army was always particular to post them. At a road junction, where they might have gone south or west, the fleet of tiny French Fiats, and the more substantial Fords, took a road that veered east. A sign by the road said:

SOMMEPY 7 Km

and presently, they began to hear the noise.

They drove past artillery parks, much like those they had already seen, full of heavies, though closer in; they shelled the rear areas, Wafer supposed. As if to emphasize the matter of shelling rear areas, they saw their first two shells burst successively at a crossroads ahead, and then three more along the road behind them. The answering shells livened the air above them. As they drew further away from the heavies, the shells arced higher. Another rumble started up, more distant still, and pitched differently. A giant, in the earth, grumbling. Those were the German guns.

The rumble increased. They saw what looked at first like blobs of vapor in the air, unknowably far away, on the rim of seeing, at the edge of the world. As they drew closer, the blobs appeared to rise, moving away from the earth slowly. Tangled thickets of cable resolved out of nothing presently; dark, thin, drooping lines, stretched between the earth and the balloon. They pulled off the road several times, always to the right shoulder, even where it leaned them

out toward the bar-ditch precariously steep; while other convoys, with more urgent business, raced past on the narrow road. Once a group of French tanks rattled past that way, great hulking iron monsters, bristling with machine guns. In Sommepy, a nexus of the road net, which looked as if it had once been a neat and tidy little town of stone buildings, there was a horrendous traffic jam.

The noise grew in the east. They continued to move toward it. And that low, foul-tempered rumble began to be punctuated with higher, more treble shrieks. They drove on and on endlessly, down the rapidly decaying road, heeling and swaying through lakes of mud. They knew that in the balloons—they could see three, but couldn't tell German from Allied—there were men who peered down owlishly, attempting to discern and target just such movements as the one they were making now.

The balloons grew in the sky. They slid left and right; they were headed into a gap between them. Another town slid past, off to their left: St. Etienne, someone said. The road disappeared in a muddy track at last, swallowed back up by the earth. The bloated bodies of horses and mules were scattered at a crossroads, the traces still draped across the bodies, and an unbelievable knacker's stench, like the stockyards and packing plants of Fort Worth, on a still, hot summer's day. There were here and there weedy little cemeteries of five and ten graves each.

While the sun, pasted like a wafer in the sky, slid down heavily to the horizon, in a dusk not unlike that of their first introduction to the heavies. They continued to give way to other traffic. Apparently, they were not a high priority. They lounged by the roadside around the trucks, always on the right shoulder. They did this once for U.S. Army wagons, pulled by as motley an assortment of mules and horses as Wafer had ever seen. The wagons were manned by

shrieking nigger teamsters, who cursed their crowbait animals with verve and panache. They pulled to the right again with no traffic at all, save the sudden and wraith-like advent of a single ornate staff car, carrying one dowdy American and a gaggle of Frenchmen in incredible uniforms, that vanished as promptly as it appeared. That break lasted a long time.

At the head of the column, the officers were talking deeply with a French officer. Thick as thieves. French non-coms, individuals unknown to them, spread out amongst the individual regiments and companies. They were guides. The trucks were left behind, sitting on the wracked and eroded shoulder of the channeled mound that served for a road in this place, the drivers sitting about on the running boards, smoking and talking. In the full dark, the sounds of the front took on a new note, as of firecrackers set off in a bucket. The dark rang around them like a gong. They passed an artillery park of 75s and 105s. It wasn't firing. In the last light, the balloons loomed at near distance in the North, the German balloons; further away in the South, the Allied balloons were behind them now.

That intermittent, desultory crackle was the first of the small-arms fire. Followed later by the shriek and whine of plunging shells. Evidence of fighting was all around them; they saw that it had been around them for some time, only they hadn't noted it. Just right there were the shattered remnants of trees, strange and bare in the chaos of their undoing. They marched past old, abandoned trenches, shell-smashed strong points, destroyed dugouts, all a chaotic jumble in an indescribable stench that grew ever stronger. They walked across stretches of dirt bombed sterile. It stank of mildew, explosives, and decay. *Don't think about that*. He knew that much: *don't think about that* ever. A gaggle of fools singing *Parlez-vous*, somewhere down the column. They passed another artillery park, French, where still shorter-range 50 mm guns were

set up. It was firing intermittently. The shells flew with a wail above them. They first heard the gun; then the shell; then distantly, the burst. The gap between gun and wail widened. The gap between wail and shellburst narrowed. They marched steadily on.

Astonishingly, voices still sang the stupid, ubiquitous song.

Mademoiselle from Saint Nazaire, parlez-vous?
Mademoiselle from Saint Nazaire, parlez-vous?
Mademoiselle from Saint Nazaire,
Never wears her underwear.
Hinky-dinky parlez-vous.

—You idjits shut up! a sergeant shouted.

There were protests, and blows. The voices subsided. They marched on down the muddy track, flashes and crunching booms from ahead, ever nearer. They saw a shellburst in the dark. There was a pause. The sound of the explosion rolled over them. They paused at what might once have been a village, a few walls among the shattered trees still upright. Not so much to be seen as a rat, nor a cat to chase it. No one stirred in all that wreckage, save they themselves, but half-buried in the mud, the evidence that there were at least rats after all. Chewed bodies the GRS hadn't found. The sky darkened, and Wafer thought he knew why they'd dawdled so on the road. The dark was a friend, up here. The order came to march again.

A whisper passed down the column.

—No talking.

—No unsecured equipment.

so Wafer tightened every strap holding every item of equipment he carried. He stuffed the dangling and clattering canteen in the side pocket of his knapsack. The movement of the column slowed to a crawl. They were strung out from route formation to column of twos, all the while

shuffling forward. The red flashlights of the officers were extinguished. Ahead of them, quite near now, lights floated down on parachutes, shedding sparks. The gunfire and the shelling were continuous, but desultory, and apparently at random targets. They heard the shuffle and whisper of feet, slithering over the dust. They were halted again, and strung out single file. There was again the shuffle and whisper of many feet, as they took up the new formation.

When suddenly the shellfire wasn't random. The bursts went off all around them, as it seemed then—later they would see how it dropped on just the tail of column, as if representing a lag in the transmission of co-ordinants from whatever watching spotter, aerial or otherwise, had found them; or it may have been dumb luck—and they peeled off the roadway and into the ditches that hemmed it, just as they had been trained to do, the officers and non-coms confusedly shrieking at them *not* to, to keep moving, to exit the zone of fire, the non-coms finally in the ditches slapping and kicking the men, shells still dropping from the void of the sky, the non-coms dragging some of them forcibly into the road, and the column moved away as the shells continued for awhile to drop, hooting softly, into the same area, that now was safely behind them. After that, noises from ahead almost threw them into a panic. The whisper of cloth and squeak of leather. The skittishness that had taken the column was in that moment palpable, as they moved forward more slowly, the non-coms still prodding. They were blooded now. Not everyone had left those ditches.

The noise shifted its quality. Wafer slowly realized, and he supposed the rest with him, that he was hearing more than the sound of himself and his fellows, walking toward the front; he was hearing also the sound of many other men, walking *toward* him, away from the front. Stumbling onward, he peered down the humped and furrowed pathway, in a dark that had

deepened to near-invisibility. The shine of a puddle in the tracks and furrows: starlight gleaming on filthy water. He understood suddenly, that these must be men they were relieving, men of some other regiment, leaving the trenches, while the one forty-first passed in. In the dark, those men appeared abruptly in the pathway, popping around a bend like children playing peek-a-boo. Men in blue French helmets, but greatcoats and puttees like their own. Who were they? These men trudged toward the rear with a stolid tread. Wafer was unamazed at how dirty, how ragged, how unkempt and bloodied and wearied they looked; nor was he startled that they were smeared with the chalky soil. But because of that whitish soil, he did not register, until some few moments after they began to file past him, that all of them were Negroes; and somehow that did startle him.

Wafer regarded them reservedly, men ranging from chocolate brown to deepest black, passive men, as they seemed, expressionless as they turned their eyes away, like niggers on the sidewalks of home. They were bandaged and bloodied, coated with the powder of that awful, chalky mud—that was what had made them seem at first like white men. Wafer could not quite encompass the idea, at first, even though he'd known such units existed, as he knew there had once been Negro troops at Fort Richardson, in Jacksboro—that, years before his time—not far at all from the farm, and everyone had known about the Ninety-second and the Ninety-third, about from day one back in Fort Worth. It shocked him nevertheless, when a black face loomed at him, out of the gloom, and met his stare head-on.

The red-eyed corporal stepped out of line and crossed the road. To Wafer, he was a shape resolving out of nothing, black-on-black. He stopped and Wafer stopped and they both stared. For that moment, men on both sides of the road shouldered past. Wafer was dimly aware of the

unwisdom of this. But the corporal sucked a tooth noisily. He stood in the midst of the roadway, more-or-less accosting Wafer in a way that on the streets of Jacksboro, or Mineral Wells, or especially Perrin, would have meant big trouble. But they weren't back home, on any street that either man knew, and that made it different. The corporal's fingers were wrapped in bloody linen. It seemed to glow, pulsing softly. Wafer gazed at it.

The corporal finally asked, —Got a smoke?

His teeth were as white as clean linen, his eyes slightly yellow. Wafer handed over an entire pack, without a word, without a thought, without hesitation. The black corporal nodded his thanks, without any move to light one, pocketed the pack, and moved on himself. The entire exchange had taken but a few seconds. Wafer rejoined the line, threading his way down the road a little faster, until he found his spot. Gerald had not paused with him. Now Gerald's blue eyes in his dark face glowered backward, toward the blacks, who were still moving steadily past. Gerald spat, and whispered, —That the Ninety-second I hear so much about?

—I don't know. It's some regiment.

—Buffalo soldiers, my grandma called em.

and shook his head angrily. He added:

—They look just like niggers to me.

and spat again, certainly for effect. Wafer said mildly:

—Well they are, aren't they?

and Gerald said, with a fierceness Wafer hadn't seen before:

—Nigger white men.

and a sudden and fiercer whisper came back with a shock from the darkness; Wafer stumbled as

he was shoved roughly, and Mays hissed:

—Shut *up* and move *on*—.

and the struggle of the young Lieutenant to keep out of his voice all fear and weakness was betrayed by a slight tremor, when he said, somewhat lamely, after the Sergeant:

—Let's move on, men. Keep it moving.

and everyone did just that. What else was there to do? The blacks moved out of the trenches, while the one forty-first moved in. They filed past one another wordlessly. Wafer spoke no further, nor was spoken to by anyone; they filed into a communications trench, thence to a second line trench, thence to a zigzag trench, and into the fire trench itself, the Main Line of Resistance. There was no sound, save the creak of leather, the slither of a bootsole in the sucking mud, feet trodding duckboards, but lightly, lightly; other faint clatters and clicks of equipment. Very shells floated above and ahead on parachutes, small stars set free. Distantly, in the darker regions of the sky, hulks of German balloons caught the light in smooth graceful curves, like breast or thigh of a woman. Periodic chatter of machine gun fire, deeper bark of rifles. When the very last of the blacks filed past, who had shocked him so, he did not even notice. The black men vanished, column's end petering out in a sputter of ones and twos and threes, clustered and hurrying. He and the others stood at the firing steps. They scattered off down the sinuous woof of the trench. Gerald stood beside him.

—Them boys looked like they'd had it, Wafer whispered.

—Them niggers?

Wafer nodded. —Yeah. They'd seen the elephant, I believe.

Gerald spat again. —Nigger white men.

Gerald looked at him without speaking. He wore the same expression he had worn the day that Wafer hit him. Then he seemed to change the subject deliberately. —I ain't hardly seen nothin of France but a training camp, a railroad, and a truck, he said. I seen a few whores, but they was along the way. Is this place even a real country?

—You think they ring down a curtain when you ain't lookin?

—Why not?

—I personally am assumin that it is, Wafer shrugged. It don't seem hardly worth the trip, otherwise.

Gerald considered it slowly. He said, —*You* ain't had much interest in the whores over here. Have you, hoss?

Gerald spat in the silence. Wafer didn't answer.

Gerald went on, —Well, if you insisted on an American, you could always go get lectured at by the YMCA. They'll have some pretty thing from Boston lecture you on cathedrals, and why we have to win the war, and how much you know your Mom is dependin on you. Remember that one in Bar-sur-Aube? My, she was a pretty.

Wafer did respond to that, and a little harshly:

—Talk about *my* peculiarities, this here is a sight more talkin than you've done in a hell of a while, like ever since I punched you that time.

—This scale of killin gets up my blood, Gerald went on imperturbably. But back to Miss YMCA, she wouldn't let you smell her dirty feet, you know that. They'd have a preacher with her, too, by now, I bet, and him gettin it ever Sunday afternoon, right after services. Jesus meek and mild, and then a little pussy in the cottage.

—You becomin disillusioned, Gerald?

—Nah. I'm thinkin of you people. It might confuse me, too, but I already knew for a long time how crazy you all are.

—You people? I thought you said your Daddy was white.

—He was, the bastard.

Wafer thought about that one for a minute, and decided it was best to leave it go. He said mildly, —Well it *is* a war.

—Yeah. But *you* folks—. Gerald shook his head. — I say, just go on and do the killin as it's needed. Quit tryin to make it seem all right, cause it never will, you know? Not the way you-all keep on lookin at it. Ain't a thing you can do that ever will make it somethin else but killin. But you *want* it to be somethin else. Like makin the world safe. Freein slaves. Killin Comanche to open up the west. Whatever.

Wafer said, —If there really ain't no good reason for bein here, then why are we here at all?

—You said it, hoss, said Gerald. *I'm* here for the bonus.

—Gerald, Wafer said, you are an evil man. I mean it, I ain't just sayin it to flatter you. It's a really good thing they *found* you a war. No tellin how many innocent folks you'd've killed, if you'd ever been give the chance.

—Who says there is such a thing? Gerald asked.

Wafer wrinkled his brow. He asked, —As a chance?

—No, said Gerald. He spat again. —As innocent folks. Like them niggers you're always disposed toward so kindly.

—Those looked to me like they knew a thing or two.

Gerald's eyes had gone close, as they did sometimes. He would not speak. His face was turned into his chest and he would not raise it.

—Whoever they are, Wafer said, they've had it for awhile now.

Gerald grunted. And then it seemed he *was* about to speak, after all. But he never got the chance. Wafer was jerked face-to-face with Mays, who said in a hoarse spray of spittle:

—You and blanketass have a nice little chat out there?

and Mays shook him so hard, his teeth literally rattled. He yelped as he bit into his own tongue. Mays flung him against the trenchwall, as if he were no account at all. And then turned, his hand already swinging in an open-handed slapped. Gerald's head jerked sharply; his helmet rattled off against the framing of the fire bay. He totered but did not fall, and as he regained his balance, he snarled, —Don't you hit me again, Mays.

Mays took him by his shirtfront and slapped him again, hard. —We could've got *shelled* because of you. One time a night not enough for you? Kill us all and them niggers, too. All because of you two. You're a idjit, but you'll learn to be quiet, see? And do what I tell you when I tell you. Fuckin idjit.

Gerald glared. —Mays, don't you hit me no more. I'm warnin you.

Mays slapped Gerald a third time, —That's *Sergeant* Mays, Geronimo.

Gerald rebounded from the slap with his black eyes wild, tearing off his greatcoat, his arms entangled as he did so, and he shrieked at Mays:

—You *bastard*, I'll *kill* you.

and Mays ignored it. He shoved Gerald against the trenchwall as he stalked off down the line.

Gerald rebounded again, shucking at his still entangled coat, and came out at last swinging. Wafer stepped behind him, caught and held him around the middle, pinning both arms, and whispered in his ear,

—He's gone! He's gone, Gerald.

and Gerald struggled in his arms, a terrible groan escaping from his clenched teeth, tossing in Wafer's embrace three and four times, before he subsided. His breathing hitched as though he wept. He pushed his way free, telegraphing somehow that murder was no longer his intention, and rested against the cold wall of earth and lumber and piled sandbags, arms crossed, slowly scratching his shoulders with both hands, and staring off down the trench after Mays, sullen and quiet.

* * *

Gerald and Wafer slept their first night in-line in a bunk notched in the wall of the trench, bundled in a ragged ball of blankets and greatcoats. It was a new trench, so there weren't enough bunks for everyone; but he and Gerald got lucky. They slept there, nestled together like spoons, to awake in the dark and the bleak chill cold. They all slept in shifts; it was someone else's turn to sleep, and theirs to stand to. They turned out blinking, moving up from the fire trench to an Observation Post, some yards beyond the forward trench, where they faced a churned-up sea of mud the consistency of pudding, a vast brown sucking sea, that never seemed quite to dry up. Certainly not now. It stank to heaven. There was a tangle of razor wire in concertina hoops, staked to posts, just beyond the parapet of the trench that was stitched now and again with a desultory machine gun fire. Their OP was beyond that wire, accessible through a shallow trench. There were twists and braids of old wire, longer and shorter, rusted or not, and old stakes for

holding them, wood or metal, rusted or not, and random fragments of bone, wood, rock, metal, ferroconcrete, all kinds of discarded equipment, including whole weapons, as well as nameless chunks of flesh and offal, all scattered all along the front. If you looked further than that, from OP or trench either one, it was best to use the periscope.

Others of these were mounted along the firing step in the trench, but the best were reserved for the OPs. They spent the first hour peering through theirs, at the German trenches across the way. The view, through even the best 'scope, was poor and narrow, but they never once exposed so much as a finger beyond the rim of the minimally fortified hole that was the OP. They already knew that exposure, whether fueled by excessive curiosity or mere foolhardiness, was a crime swiftly punishable. The German trenches looked much the same as their own, anyway. In an order book, they noted down the occasional observation. Gun barrel observed here. Evident machine gun post there. Crashed aircraft with dead body so many yards beyond the wire, at grid co-ordinant thus-and-such. Several helmets visible in a certain shellhole, and so forth. Upslope, past the German trenches, they saw the ruins of the town of Machault; woods to the right, and the buildings of what had been a farm, until recently.

In the first few days in-line, it became clear to them also that the artillery of both sides—by a kind of tacit consent—had registered their shells on certain places, and fired on exactly those same places at exactly the same time, every day, all very routine and regular-like. Likewise, by the same sort of consent, each side fired off a morning clip of ammunition, and were done with it, until evening—when they would all fire off another full clip, everybody at once, from both sides, and seemingly into the air. It was a system. The idea seemed to be—as was immediately apparent to each and every private soldier—to expend enough ammunition that the rear-echelon

officers would think there was fighting going on, even if only of the most desultory kind. There was still occasional sniping, to be sure, so that everybody understood the war was still on; and also there was still the deadly nightly business of patrols. The morning and evening volley were called the six-at-six, because it was about that hour they would fire, morning and night, and the clips of virtually every sidearm in the field held the same six rounds. The machine gun fire was a little more random—the posts were moved frequently—but all you had to do to avoid that was stay down—it, too, at least tending to fall in certain registered zones, that everyone was aware of. Keeping safe was a matter of knowing the schedule, and the grid co-ordinants the ordnance would fall on, and when and/or where there would be a bout of firing. Gerald called it a civilized war.

—It can't go on, Wafer said. How can any of this go on?

—Why the hell not? Gerald asked him. It's just the thing for white folks killin one another, you know? And its *been* goin on for four years now, remember?

The Division made improvements to the trenches and the dugouts, and improvements to the methods of bringing up food. There were inescapable difficulties to living in the dirt, in earthen caves and pits, but in some dugouts, things had actually begun to get a little homey, for however long it would last. There was talk of a show. "Show" was a new word they had here, for battle. But that time, it never materialized; they rotated with the one-forty-first, the second regiment of the brigade. The one-forty-first occupied the forward trenches and the MLR, while they, the one-forty-second, occupied the secondary line, behind the MLR. The remnants of Machault were there; the lines had moved that far forward. They could have some leisure now, in the shell-smashed buildings.

—I do wish I had a woman, said Gerald.

Wafer asked him exasperatedly, —Can you just one time go one full hour without once making any reference at all to your God damn pecker?

Gerald grinned. They all sat around a fire, built in a rude hearth of chalky rock, leavings of an exploded wall. There were Gerald and Wafer, McAllister, the boy Martin from Mineral Wells, the Mexican Lopez, and a few others. They were resting. Around them, the shattered walls of a modest house. The wrecked furniture fueled the fire. Most of the thatch roof was scattered, the room they were in quite open to the sky. Above and beside them, a building hundreds of years old, owner of a history about which they neither knew nor particularly cared, fallen to a cordite-stinking ruin, one more blasted hulk in a country that seemed to consist in this region of little else, much unlike the salad days of training at Bar-sur-Aube, where some of them had even become acquainted with the open-air cafe. This was open-air, all right, though there the similarities ended. No delousing had been done since they reached the front. Wafer sat in his longhandles, with his fly stretched open and his genitals exposed. He searched through the hair methodically. Gerald sat in his skivvies. His arm was cocked backwards around his neck, and he was bent with his nose in his own armpit. They both carried on this way for some while. The other men did likewise. Lopez searched through Martin's head. From a nearby billet, a lone voice sang querulously:

> *—Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-vous?*
> *Mademoiselle from Armentiers, parlez-vous?*

—I wish that bastard'd learn some other song, Wafer muttered into his crotch. He did not pause in his diligent search. There were murmurs of assent from all around. McAllister was running a flame around the seams of a shirt, holding the stick up to it methodically, square-inch

by square-inch, to thus treat eventually the entire garment.

On the hearth, a pot somewhat like a Dutch oven glowed dull red. There was a pan of coffee set well away from the fire. Gerald and Wafer both unwound themselves almost simultaneously from this close inspection of their hairier parts, and tossed something seemingly invisible toward the pan glowing on the fire. There were two small snaps, two brief sparks in the pan. Gerald and Wafer fell again to the same inspection. They and the others tossed lice into the pan in a steady, distasteful rain. Always, there were the same small snaps, the same brief sparks of the lice incinerating. Gerald muttered:

—I never had no cooties at home.

and Wafer replied:

—Your Mama'd never let you get dirty enough.

—That's a gospel fact.

—Your Mama never let you do much. Did she?

—She let me go to Church.

McAllister's attention was zeroed in steadily on the shirt he cleared of lice. He batted no eye, uttered no word to betray that he even heard this, the most recent bout of an ongoing round of recreational sacrilege. His small personal Bible remained in his tunic pocket, a present from his pastor, a popular edition for departing soldiers, presumably because it was equipped with supposedly bullet-proof metal covers, and a bullet-proof metal box as well. Stories of narrow escapes with that cover were widely disseminated at home, and widely disbelieved in the A.E.F. Like the stories of a secret army of deserters, living under No Man's Land.

—What she really done was *make* me go to church, Gerald said. And I really ain't seen

much Sunday school over here.

—I seen the angel of fuckin Mons last night, said Wafer. The jerries shot the bitch down.

There were grunts of rueful laughter. Everyone in ragged succession tossed more of the tiny biting, insects into the fire. Snap and flash. Snap and flash. Gerald peered at Wafer speculatively. He said suddenly:

—If you check my scalp I'll check yours.

and everyone laughed again. Wafer said:

—How can I be sure of keepin it?

—Well you can't. But I got neighbors who'd be proud to have it. They'd keep it real careful, too. Shine it up with oil; keep the hide nice and soft. They might even wear it to church. Big scalpers are big on church, too. Sort of hedgin your bets. But you'd be proud of the respect they'd show it, and they'd be proud of your scalp.

At the word, Gerald leapt up from his seat and danced about the fire. He patted his hand on his mouth, hopping a sort of buck-and-wing in circles, round and round the larger circle of the fire. Lopez beat a tom-tom beat on the top of Martin's head. McAllister watched him morosely, but kept his peace. Gerald hopped and sang:

—*Woo*-woo-woo-woo-*Woo*-woo-woo-woo—.

punctuated with laughter. Everyone was laughing and clapping time. Lopez picked up an old pan, and started in beating his tom-tom rhythm on the bottom of it. Wafer said:

—Martin's head sounded better.

— *Woo*-woo-woo-woo-*Woo*-woo-woo-woo.

And the round of grunting, rueful laughter gradually subsided. Lopez put away his

improvised drum. A wind came up, sluicing through the shattered walls. They all shivered. The fire flared, orange light cast on the walls, and Gerald sighed with feeling, and then stuck his nose in his armpit, and dug with thumb and forefinger for lice. They heard the staccato rap of machine gun fire from the front, and several stray rifle shots. Wafer looked at the sky through the shattered roof, and said:

—It looks like rain again.

Someone said:

—More mud.

Gerald took his nose out of his armpit. He said,

—Good God I need a woman.

and Wafer snorted while the others laughed.

The next day, the one-forty-second re-entered the MLR. They moved forward a second time the next day. The town of Vaux-Champagne lay ahead. One-forty-first and one-forty-second were in-line together in the forward trenches, the entire infantry strength of the Seventy-first Brigade; the Seventy -second Brigade moved up to the MLR. Similar build-ups took place left and right. Something was up, and everybody knew it.

* * *

Officers moved down the trench, shouldering past the enlisted men, light trap of the big dugout at the far end like a sleepy eye, opening and closing dimly. Early morning, sometime in the wee hours. The men watched the officers pass in silence. They had all been told what was coming.

Wafer could see the officers. They were gathering near the dugout, a faint cluster, all

glancing down from time to time at their watches. He looked at Gerald, and jerked his head toward the gaggle. Gerald watched expressionless. The Lieutenant, grim-faced, walked toward them, with Mays at his heels. Mays grasped each successive corporal by his shirtfront as he passed, whispering in his ear. Gerald's face was a stone, when his turn came. His eyes flickered at Wafer. Everyone could sense it, as the tension heightened; the men clotted into rough groups, each about a non-com. He and the balance of his squad gathered around Gerald. They all began to move.

Wafer walked toward the opening of the fire trench. Others shouldered forward with him, while the narrowing trench squeezed them into a single file. He passed under camouflage netting, and moved forward in utter darkness. He walked past the edge of a shell-smashed traverse, his greatcoat catching briefly on the blunt shattered end of a timber, and past it. A breeze blew in from the outside. The darkness closed in more tightly still, hugged him like a lover, and he moved down a long tube of crumbling, chalky soil, dimly seen, debouching into still more blackness. He didn't know any longer who was with him, who was not, if he was alone, if he would ever be anything else except alone, ever again; he knew where he was supposed to be, but whether or not he was actually *there* was something else again. He tottered along, in a long, blind, silent, stumbling fall.

Starlight glowed above him. A non-com, not Mays, at this new opening grabbed him by the collar of his greatcoat, whispered directions, and an obscene injunction to silence. He passed into the network of abandoned, shell-blasted trenches that laced through all this portion of No-Man's-Land. The covered trench had brought them safe to the middle, and the trench they entered now was more-or-less parallel with the German line. He moved forward a further

interminable time, moonless starlight little better than no light, and finally stopped with the others. He leaned tiredly in the stale, soft earth of yet another smashed parapet. He was ankle deep in the muck of the shattered, poorly-drained trench. The air, the very soil stank of explosives, unwashed bodies, urine and shit, death. He sensed rather than saw the men hunkered with him. If they had kept their order, Gerald should be just ahead of him, and the boy Martin from Mineral Wells behind.

They hunkered in the shattered trench. He mounted the old earthen firing-step, crouching because so much of the parapet had been blown away in some past bombardment, and peered into the dark carefully. The ghostly stark ruins of a village appeared out of the gloom occasionally, reflecting the light of random gun or shellburst. He could not remember its name. He wondered again at the strangeness of the world, that somehow, he should wind up *here*. Very lights popped off in the sky, like Independence Day. They floated down smoking on parachutes, the rain a hazy globe around them. The rain seemed to float, too. There was now and then the short, sharp bark of a rifle, or a brief, routine *chat-chat-chat* of machine guns.

Wafer leaned on the muddy wall of the crumbled old trench, and he waited. Presently the rain commenced something more than a drizzle, cold down his neck. He saw, gleaming in its oily sheen, Gerald's dark face, the Mexican Lopez beyond and not unlike him, McAllister next, and the opposite way the boy Martin from Mineral Wells, whose lower lip trembled with the chill. There was a distinct thump from a nearby flare gun. A red flare shrieked into the sky.

That was when the big guns lit up in back of them. Almost everyone turned to peer over the rear lip of the trench. The boy Martin crouched as he was, uninterested, lip atremble. The whole horizon blazed with gunfire, sequentially right to left, as far as Wafer could see. The

sound, a terrific tumult, reached them seconds later. The shells crackled and shrieked overhead, a strange, ululating cry through the air. The Stokes mortars of the French second division were near enough, that the concussion of their discharge shivered the mud in the trench floor. All the shellfire seemed at first to be coming only from American and French guns, but then the German lines opened up in answer. The German shells burst behind them, in the trenches left to a skeleton staff. The artillery fire seemed to slacken, but then it once again increased, and the rain with it. The drainage of the shattered trench continued poor. They lay or stood in a muddy, ankle-deep soup.

The shriek and cry of the shells passed above them like portents. The mud slathered over their leggings. Shells burst behind them; they crouched in relative safety. The din was nevertheless like a pressure steadily applied, an ache proceeding illogically but steadily from the soul outward, relentless. Wafer saw dimly left and right men kneeling to re-wrap and bind their puttees. He knelt to bind up his own, just to have something to do. Then he leaned in the slope of the bank, and somehow, dozed amid the uproar, while the concussion of bursting shells blew the rain lateral.

At last, the artillery duel tapered off. At four a.m., there was a strange silence. The rain slackened at last. A patch of orange light glowed in the east, out of Germany. The men had all unconsciously shouldered up together, like cattle under a tree in a storm. Sergeant Mays came, smacked them on their shoulders, shook them awake, and reordered their intervals as he went. He whispered:

—Be ready. It’s fifteen of five. Be ready.

and passing further down:

—Be ready. It's fifteen of five.

while they stood in numb cold misery, waiting.

Behind them, there was another concerted crash of artillery fire, a great light like a rival dawn from the west, going off in an arc from north to south, by salvoes of four or five guns. No doubt very impressive, to officers and engineers alike. They cowered under it. The first shells burst very near. The next further out, and the next still further, and so on, until they were exploding in the German wire, blowing it to bits. A whistle blew shrilly down the line. Other, nearer whistles picked it up, shrilling in the heavy, wet, cold air. The non-coms and officers stood on ladders, the braver or more ambitious or more foolish on the parapets, shouting and waving:

—Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!

and men began to climb out of the trench. He saw the boy Martin clamber up the parapet and stand, limned against the lighting sky with his rifle in one hand, and look back. He moved as if to reach down his hand and help the others climb out. But he never took a single step, only half-turned at the knees, his feet as stationary as if they had been glued in place, for the moment it took him to tumble headlong.

And he hung over the parapet, gushing an unbelievable flood of blood, most of his throat gone. The blood jetted into the mud, where it pooled on the remnants of the firing step; and the boy's mouth moved just slightly, and his lower lip trembled one more time, and was still. His eyes glassed over, fading. The blood continued in a steady but slacking stream, overflowing the step, falling amid the fragments of duckboard in the trenchfloor, growing in the pale, brown, soupy mud a perfect circle of vivid red. Slackjawed, Wafer stood staring.

—Come on, Gerald said. He had his hand out. He was laying on the edge of the trench, where the Martin boy had died, where the Martin boy's body lay beside him, the flow of blood slackened just that quickly to a trickle, the lifeless eyes fixed on Wafer. Wafer turned away, and took Gerald's hand, and slipped over the edge of the trench. He pressed his body to the earth. He slithered with Gerald into an old shellhole. He heard like nattering insects the zip of bullets overhead; they passed so close. he heard the thump and smack as they struck this object, that one. Left, right, ahead, sharp yips and screams of pain. Reddish flecks and chunks of matter, that he could not afford to look at too closely. Gouts of earth flung up. A continuous rain of fragments of wood, stone, metal, earth. And smacking down wetly, men.

—They fire five rounds and stop, said Gerald.

Wafer absorbed that slowly. He said, —What?

—Listen. They'll fire five rounds and then they stop.

He listened. And sure enough, Gerald was right. The guns fired, *Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*—beat—*Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*—beat—with a pause of a second or so between each group of five. He looked at Gerald and said, —Why do they do that?

—Damned if I know. You wait here, I'll go first.

—But will it be long enough?

—We'll know in a minute.

Across the way was another shell-damaged trench, little more left than a shallow dip, and at the beat, Gerald popped up and ran for it, and rolled into it, while the unseen machine gunners got the range, and chewed up the lip of it savagely. When they stopped and began again to sweep the broader field, Wafer made the same move, and he made it, too. They crawled together down

another shattered trench, knee-walking when it deepened, to a place where a group of men clustered at a razorwire obstacle. One worked it with a pair of clippers. He finally opened a gap about three feet wide. Beyond the obstacle the trench ran for a distance, and then tapered off to nothing. They all sprinted out of that cover, downward into a valley, where far away to the left, a shattered church spire hung, suspended in the mist, with no apparent connection to the earth, and the sun was a huge orange ball beyond it, cresting the hills like a promise. But their own concern was the shattered woods hard by, and just beyond those, the ruins of another nameless hamlet. They all headed there, a field of running figures, sprinting across the blasted landscape.

A splinter bedded itself in Wafer's hand and he gaped at it. It was strangely without pain. He never stopped running while he one-handed his Springfield, and gripped the splinter between thumb and forefinger, and jerked it out. His hand bled, but only weakly, as he gripped the Springfield again with both and ran on, toward an alien wood, amid the welter of his fellows, thinking now only that he mustn't drop the rifle, and far away there was a hiss and a thump. The earth beneath him quivered with it. They were in the woods. The firing picked up, and gouged out more of those wet, pointy splinters. They tumbled fleet, unseen, lethal through the moist and heavy air. There were more distant thumps. Like the feet of giants, that trod upon the earth unhindered.

—Gas! someone shouts. Gas! Gas!

Wafer looked back and saw a greenish-white haze of phosgene gas, hanging amid the leprous trees, and in that haze men floundered, like fish out of water, mouths just so working, eyes popped, dying. One man swinging his gas mask at the end of his arms, a pink froth rising from eyes, mouth, nose, until at last and mercifully, some quirk of the earth's odd folding

blocked him from sight. The chill while Wafer's bowels are dropping, his body clenching, the buttery loosening of his fear like a flavor in his mouth. As he ran, he pawed at his own gas mask. There seemed to never be an end of running. It astonished him, the number of things that could be done at the fly. Away to the left, a machine gun started up firing. Ugly, methodic sound, like a cultivator, or the hay baler they had used to run sometimes off the blocked-up axle of a Model-T. *Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*—beat—*Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*—beat.

He got the mask on. Now he saw the world through twin smeared portholes. The machine gun was very loud and very near. He ran on, a thrill of horror shook out down his spine like a loop snapped in a lariat, lest some vile, spitting thing kill him, too, as something had the man ahead, seated against a tree trunk all bewildered, in a growing crimson pool. Yet his horror remained strangely remote. He saw Gerald by the tree, staring straight at him. He held something concealed in his hand. Gerald and the dead man fell behind, and Wafer laughed, suddenly and jarringly. A still-limber treebranch snapped a welt across his cheek. He laughed again. Some part of his mind recognized the dead man: the profane, ever-clearheaded, all-knowing Sergeant Mays. He had a new mouth where his throat had been.

His mind yammered, calling on the Lord for safety. He knew it instantly for hilarious wishfulness. Amid all this carnage, not just wishful, but *ludicrous*. Too, too precious. He tumbled through a draw. The firing went ahead of him. He slipped in the slick mud, and fell in a puddle with a splash, the surge of the water revealing and hiding, revealing and hiding, the body of a Frenchman, who clearly had been there for some while. It had begun to rain again: a thin, stinging mist, with flecks of ice. He moved on. It seems a mystery that he should be here at all. What could he have been thinking of?

When they first arrived, they'd been given preprinted postcards, and ordered to fill them out. The non-coms stood by to collect them immediately. Mays smiling placidly. They were to be mailed home, to reassure the families of the men. He wondered to whom he should address his. The others seemed to complete the cards very quickly. Wafer sat for a long time, on a bench in the enormous barn where they had first been billeted, at the port city Brest, staring at that postcard. The postcard said:

THE SHIP ON WHICH I SAILED HAS ARRIVED SAFELY OVERSEAS.

Name_____

Organization_____

and they *were* in France, *safely*, it was true, for most of July and much of August, and expected to take up some quiet sector of the line before being used offensively. But that never happened. The world entire was shaken, upended, and poured in a jumble to the ground, a blur that wound him up right *here*, sprawled in the mud beside a rotting corpse. Gerald and the others were just ahead. He heard steady firing. He came out of the puddle, and started up the slope, from beyond which the firing came. And he wished *here* were somewhere else. He had scrawled a fictitious address on the card; in the end, it went to no one.

The ground rushed up of a sudden, and whomped him, and he lay on it, very still, while a ruckus kicked up in the dirt above his head, and a fly crawled across his nose to feast in the corner of his crusted eye. The ground quivered beneath him, as he realized vaguely an explosion had spun him off his feet. He was lost in the vastness of the noise. He had forgot a thing, but he did not know what it was. He laughed again, foolishly, incongruously. God was busy elsewhere. Lost in his church spire, hung weightless in the air. Bells rang in his ears just so, a call to

worship. He rolled to his side, and carefully examined himself. No holes. He seemed not to be leaking anything vital, but he had, he realized, wet his pants quite thoroughly. Nameless shapes flickered at the edge of seeing.

He raised the edge of his gas mask, sniffed cautiously. A shellhole leaking white smoke. Still the ongoing patter of rifle fire; round after round, vanished in the sucking mud. To what end? Stench of sulfur. Stench of decay. Stench of sewer or outhouse. But no reek of phosgene; no killing burn of gas. He pulled the mask away from his face. There were other men around him doing likewise, other Americans. He pushed the mask aside and let it hang from his neck. He clambered forward, knee-walking, and sprawled against an earthen berm. He lay on his back and tried to squeeze out a clear thought, but none came. The other men lay across the crest of this gully, and they were firing, and jacking out shells, and the brass casings fell smoking to the grainy earth, and they fired a clip empty and ejected it, to slide in another, and carry on firing, the noise fading to deafness benumbed and bemused, the ringing, ringing, ringing, of bells.

There were voices, too, English and that French grunting he hated almost as much as the German, not yet wondering what cause he had to hate either. And the firing from his platoon. He saw Gerald, who looked back at him from upslope, and mouthed words that Wafer could not hear. —*Will we die here*? *Will God not* see *us die here*—? He clambered up the slope and dropped heavily beside Gerald. Gerald, peering down his rifle, spared him a glance; then turned back to his business and snapped off a round; ejected the spent cartridge, closed the bolt on the next; snapped off a round. Wafer rolled over on his back, looked up at the sky. It pleased him it was still there.

He gripped his own Springfield in both hands. One finger gently caressed the ball of the

bolt handle. He stared at the gray sky through half-stripped limbs of trees and drifting shoals of smoke, and he wondered again what it was he had forgotten. Something. Something important. More French, from somewhere—he could hear the fruity rich sound of it. He could smell shit and woodsmoke and burnt powder and men gone long without a wash. He could smell a knacker's yard, which made him think again of Fort Worth's stockyards, where it seemed, a long time ago, he had taken a woman of such grace, he thought the world should stand aside its rules, be still its clamor, and let him be with her. —*If only I were with her now*—. And he heard voices again. Someone kicked his bootheels.

Wafer looked around and met the angry blue eyes of a French officer. The eyes would have matched the coat, if it had been clean. Nothing was clean here, and the French officer was very angry. He shouted at Wafer in that gurgling he used for a language, and Wafer just stared. There was a long splatter of blood down his coat front. The French officer gestured wildly at the firing line. There were numbers on the collar of his coat. His helmet gleamed wet in the mist. Wafer turned to look and saw all the other men firing, working their rifle bolts, flipping the empty cartridges in gleaming, golden arcs to the ground. The French officer stood in the declivity where a platoon or more of American troops were disposed, as in a trench, all firing into a smoky mass of trees directly before them. An American officer, his hands clasped behind his back, walked with a strange decorum out of the leaf-shorn dying of the woods, and stood beside the Frenchman silently. There were not numbers on the collar of his coat. A strip of cloth on his arm announced: MP, Military Police. His helmet, too, gleamed wet in the mist. Wafer shivered once hard, and then rolled on his belly, and crawled further up the incline, a bit past Gerald. He shouldered his Springfield, and peering into the gleaming wet mist of trees, flipped off his safety.

He settled in looking for a target. His elbows sank in the mud. There was more kicking at his heels, and he fought down the sudden, angry urge to turn and fire on this, his nearest tormentor. He searched in the tangle and the fog for a target, but he saw nothing, save only trees and mist. Then he thought he saw the curve of a helmet, also wet with the fog. His sights framed it neatly. And he fired.

* * *

All around, the smell of onion. It interfered, but their senses had been honed to new keenness in the past three weeks. October was almost done. Without pause or hesitation, Gerald and Wafer rolled directly into the nearest shellhole, at the first bark of gunfire. From the German line, a green flare ripped into the sky—glowing spatterline of sparks, head like a comet, it raced in a long, glowing parabola. A starshell would follow. Ahead and to the left, the *minenwerfers* coughed like lions. You could not hear those damn things travel. Wafer held perfectly still, waiting for the explosions. Presently they came, some distance away. The starshell followed then, its lethal bloom of light from the sky followed in seconds by the *whump!* of its ignition. A machine gun opened up. *Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*—beat—*Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*—beat—. But was firing at something else. The starshell died in the air, like the end of things, and Wafer slowly relaxed on the chill, muddy dirt. His eyes saw an oblong of grainy soil, closed in by blackness. Gerald hissed at him.

He brought his head up with a start.

A yellow flare ripped from the German line, another sputtering arc. He thought for not the first time: *I am in hell*. Peering through the gap between his helmet rim and the damp, clotted earth, he could see Gerald's shoulder, pressed in the mud. They lay in a shell hole, thirty yards

out and fifty or more South into no-man's land, from the OP they had started from. So far as any help for them, that had just as well be the moon. Wafer raised his head a little higher, exposing as little of his face as possible. He peered into the gloom, off in the direction the firing had come from. Vague shapes slithered low to the ground, shapes such as he himself must present, ill-defined, and jealous of seeing. Gerald watched him, but did not look himself. Wafer had the better vantage. Around them was flailed, smoky earth, breathing out vapors into air impending dawn, a dawn much too near to be as far out as they were. Still some green—vagrant sprigs precariously clinging —this ground was newly contested, the Bosche vacating the old front-line to withdraw to this place, and the Allies—the 36th Division—pressing them closely. Clear-cut stumps of trees, here on the south bank. A forest had been razed, to give a field of fire. North there was the loop of a river, the Aisne. The straighter gleam of the canal that followed it, twin streaks of water, glittering with the light of the star-shell. High ground beyond, where artillery was set up—*minenwerfers* and worse. The wreck of a farm, hugged on three sides by that loop of river. *Foret Ferme*, Forest Farm. The men of the brigade called it *Fray Farm*.

Gerald watched silently. Wafer lay two fingers on his own forearm— *infantry* —held up three fingers—*at least three*—made his fingers walk—*coming toward us*—and hooked a thumb toward the region of the vague movements—*from there*. They held perfectly still. They had to get back into the regimental line before first light—very near now—or they would spend the day in this very place, and in great peril. Wafer became the more aware of the thousand cooties and fleas that feasted on him, as he always did in these tense minutes of enforced stillness. He did not scratch his many itches—let the vampires feast, for now. They lay for long minutes. They heard and felt the passage past them of treading feet. It might have been a French patrol, from

the 73rd Division, to the east. Or even someone from the one-forty-first, or possibly even the one-forty-two, though no one else from the division was supposed to be out in this sector, save they two.

They did not arise to inquire. They waited longer, after the steps had passed. Gerald tapped his forearm, pointed to the egress of a ditch, left over perhaps from the onion field this once had been. Gerald went first. Wafer waited, then slithered like a reptile through the gelatinous goo of the shellhole, into the thicker and mustier mud of the ditch. They crawled for a long time. They found the shallow trench near a stump, white with age, blown out of the ground intact. They entered the trench and moved down it at a crawl. Like the ditch from the field, it wasn't military, but something fortuitously left over from the peace. The stench from a dead body rose all around them. From the smell and the stump, they knew they were entering the lines of the one-forty-second. They exchanged password and countersign at the OP, a little bit left of McAllister. That OP was the regiment's most forward post. They entered the communication ditch that ran out to LP and OP and beyond.

McAllister was hung rotting in the barbed wire near that ditch, like a one-forty-second gatekeeper. He was well up in the mass of it, plainly exposed to observation, having been blown there two weeks before, by shellfire. It would be a dicey proposal to remove him, so there he stayed, ripening steadily. For just that reason, in the past week, his body had become useful in guiding patrols safely back into the lines. They didn't need to see him; they simply followed the smell. At the LP, they exchanged password and countersign again. At the forward trench, just outside the wire, on their elbows in the communication ditch, they hissed to make their presence known. They mouthed but did not speak aloud, even to whisper, good-luck greetings as they

crawled past McAllister:

—Hey, Mac.

—Good to see you, Mac.

The forward trench was held by a skeleton platoon, standing to in anticipation of first light. A heavier line, in a proper fire trench, was set up 20 yards or so behind. A labor battalion of niggers had dug the whole system, under almost continuous fire, just the week McAllister died, while Division did its best to cover them from minimal, foxhole-style fortifications. Wafer and Gerald threaded their way through the forward trench, and down another, not ditch, but proper communication trench. The light rose, and behind them they heard the firing. The morning six-at-six. Artillery shells arced overhead. The shellbursts from the German guns were close enough to wobble the ground beneath them, as they made way through the trench, but they never broke stride. They saw the southernmost strong point dead ahead: an earthen fortification fronted by three rows of concertina wire, shored with sandbags, bristling with the fat, round tubes of water-cooled machine guns.

—You're certain, Corporal? the Lieutenant asked Gerald. Wafer stood silently waiting. The Lieutenant sat at a table where a candle guttered, and a half-full bottle of whiskey sat beside two dirty tin cups. Behind him, the Captain slumped on a cot, his back against the earthen wall. They were in the HQ dugout, just behind the strong point.

—Yessir, Gerald answered. He reached out and tapped the map. His finger moved on it as he spoke. —That was the only wire. They may be more, over here, closer in to Fray, but that's all there is between here and that forward LP they got by the old well there.

—What else? Any bodies to tell GRS about?

—McAllister is still there. I seen some boys from the one-forty-first, too. Shellfire, looked like. A patrol, maybe that one from last week. They was at least three, maybe four. Four, counting all the heads. They been there a day or two, anyhow.

He dropped three round dogtags on the table. The Lieutenant nodded.

Still pointing down at the map, Gerald went on, —And someone come past us, here, in the onion field. We let 'em go.

—Who was it?

—Don't know, sir. Didn't ask, neither.

—That it?

—That's it.

Wafer spoke up. —Is there gonna be another show, sir?

The Lieutenant said nothing. He was little older than they. He was just as dirty, scratched just as often and as intimately. His eyes looked a thousand years old. He stared at the candle flame for a moment, and then said, somewhat abruptly, —You boys want a drink?

Gerald and Wafer looked at one another. They stepped closer to the table.

* * *

The shelling kept up for two hours, just at sunset. Here, the German trenches were only thirty yards away; the atomized soil of No-Man's-Land was uselessly pulverized again. Huge fountains of smoke and dust and flame and lofted debris rained down across the way, but the response of the German guns was weak. The ground shivered with the Allied cannonade, as if afraid of what the night might bring. Wafer watched it all with his back turned, his head resting against the sandbags at the parapet edge, just at the notch where a periscope could go. His

helmet was lowered across his eyes, and he watched to the east, at an angle that kept him unobserved. Now and then, he saw a body fly in the air, and his guts roiled; but he kept stoic and silent, alone with his fear. A private enough thing: —*that could be me. That could happen to me*—. His gas mask dangled at his neck like a rosary.

Gerald said, —The word is we're goin in tomorrow mornin. Straight into Fray Farm.

Wafer shrugged. It seemed best, least productive of ill luck. He said nothing. The cannon fire slackened and finally stopped.

—They ain't no trenches in there like we seen before, Gerald said. They ain't been no fightin here before, so they still ain't had time to build em up no whole lot.

Wafer snorted, —You think you might find you a woman, don't you?

Gerald grinned. —Found one in Chalons.

—It ain't a village, it's a farm. And you found a dose of clap in Chalons.

—And a very fine dose it was.

—You howled like a dog every time you peed.

Wafer saw two cook's assistants. They came out of the mouth of a communication trench. Each one carried two buckets of stew, on a harness contraption. The doughboys nearest them moved quickly; one of the two just stopped where he stood, and proceeded to dip out the stew. A third appeared, and commenced to pass out bread from a rucksack. The second bucketman was mobbed just as quickly as the first. Wafer and Gerald hung back, waiting with mess-kits in hand. Once served, they sat on the firing step and ate slowly. The evening closed down around them. By the time they stood back up, the shadows had lengthened, and the night was gathering fast. By the LP where Gerald and Wafer had returned, where McAllister lay in the

stacked loops of concertina wire**,** the Mexican Lopez called out in the dusk:

—Buenas noche, Mac! See you in the mornin—!

and other men of the regiment took up the nightly cry—

—Good night, Mac!

—Good night, Mac!

—Good night!

—of what had become a ritual. While across the way, in the loop of Aisne, where awaited those others in Foret Ferme, they cried out, too:

— Guten nicht!

— Good night, Mac!

* * *

At four a.m. that morning, Wafer and Gerald stood in the dark and cold, awaiting the false dawn. They lay against the parapet of the sandbagged fire trench, braced and crossbeamed, with squad bays and notched bunks and strong points and ferroconcrete dugouts for the officers, and duckboards in the bottom, well-sloped for drainage. Altogether capably engineered. The Captain strode down the parados, staring at his watch. The lanyard dangled from his hand; a pistol flopped in its holster at his waist, his Sam Browne belt dulled with weather and use. Wafer shook his head as if to clear it. The trenches looked unaccountably snug and pleasant. For a desperate moment, he looked at Gerald. He said abruptly, —Is it the end of October yet?

—Huh? said Gerald. Gerald hefted his shotgun. More than half had them now. They were automatics, very effective. The Captain climbed to the firing step and stood by a ladder. His right leg was visibly quivering. He unbuttoned the flap of his holster and pulled out his

service .45 automatic. He stared at his watch.

—October, said Wafer. Is October over yet?

Gerald looked bewildered for a moment, and then he said, —No. I think it's over next week.

The Captain seemed to be counting, his lips moving, his eyes steady on his watch as he clambered at a crouch to the top of the ladder. He kept his head ducked below the rim of the parapet. The Captain clutched his pistol in his hand. He leaned on the ladder and his knees pressed dimples into the sandbags.

—Next week? Wafer was shivering. He feared it could be seen. He shrugged within his greatcoat, so much larger on him now, and dissembled, —Why is it so cold here?

—Because it is, Gerald said. Watching with a touch of suspicion. —Maybe you'll get lucky and catch the flu.

—You're a damn fool, Wafer snapped. Flu's killin more of us than the fuckin Bosche.

—Maybe you'll get shot in a leg. Gerald had that cold, speculative gleam in his eyes. Wafer thought he was calculating odds, measuring Wafer's cowardice, just how far his fear would take him. Wafer was afraid himself; afraid he would run, afraid he wouldn't run. He *knew* he was here for no good reason, and knew that he was here to stay to the end, just because he was here. But all h e said was:

—Jesus jesus jesus.

and his breath hung before him in the air, like a spirit. It was that cold. Gerald said breezily:

—I ain't *seen* Jesus just here lately.

—Fuck you.

—Your mama always claimed to know him personal, didn't she?

Wafer's eyes flickered back and away. —It ain't the moment, Gerald.

—Now you sound like Mac.

—Say! Wafer said explosively. He said, too, in an implausible burst of postmortem bonhomie, —How the hell *is* Mac this mornin?

—He stinks.

The Captain fumbled at his Colt, the watch encumbering his hand. He thumbed off the safety, and put his whistle in his mouth, his eyes still locked on his watch. His right leg trembled, still taut on the next-to-top rung of the ladder. Shells shrieked past overhead, burst in front of the German wire, already shredded by the morning's two-hour barrage. The Captain held the pistol in his hand, and his hand shook. He jacked a round into its chamber. More shells arced above them, each successive volley moving a few yards forward, reaching for the German trenches. At the precise moment foreordained, a whistle sounded; the Captain echoed it with four shrill blasts on his own whistle; he waved his pistol in the air, and began to scream:.

—Let's *go!* Let's *go!* Let's *go!*

and Wafer found himself amid the moving figures, same as always, all rushing headlong to collision. And of course, the German gunners long since had the range, and the shells began to drop among them. They moved across the waste, bent low, neat of foot. They came to the bare, bone-white stump of the tree, bombed roots-up out of the earth, aslant a trickle of scummed-over water from a shellhole full of it, wherein floated nameless lumps, most of them new, the latest fellows in a grand fraternity. Wafer's throat was tight with fear. His scrotum sucked up against his body. He went forward with the rest, bent over like a man moving against a strong wind.

They all walked steadily forward, behind their own barrage, into the German counterfire.

Behind them, in the second line trench, the battle police formed a skirmish line and moved out. They harried forward all the stragglers, thus caught between the Germans, and their own. Wafer stepped over a helmeted skull, grinning up out of the mud, and the step seemed, strangely, to go on a long while. His foot never came down. He saw it with strange detachment, suspended where it should fall, and the next step be so taken. He saw Gerald spin like a top and falter. He saw beyond Gerald, a piece of a body fall flaming out of the sky, and bounce three times. He could hear shotguns starting to go off. He could hear the *Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*-beat. See the flash of the shotguns, too, as the first squads moved down the forward German trenches, below Fray Farm. The machine guns. *Chat-chat-chat-chat-chat*-beat. The flat, lethal report of rifle shots. And screams and cries and curses. The boom of the Brownings. And the burning of wool and wood, of flesh and stone.

All of that receding in a strange silence. Whirling into background. He realized he was flying. He wondered if he were dead. He was floating through the air, the landscape lofted above him somehow. Then beside, then below, beside again, the running figures of the men seeming frozen, in attitudes of forward-leaning weightlessness. He saw behind the advancing line of battle, the battle police, with their MP brassards, just clearing the LPs. He saw McAllister, a spectacle of gray flesh, sprawled swollen on his nest of wire. Whatever had become of McAllister's Bible? Was it still in his pocket? Tumbling, he saw the German wire at Fray Farm as the walking barrage went through it, shaking and jerking it on its posts, shredding it, disintegrating it. He saw the canal, and the Aisne beyond it. He saw the dark slash of the German fire trench, and a zigzag communication trench, and the sandbags there of a dugout

entrance, covered by a gray blanket. At a sharp angle, he saw the shell-blasted remnant trace of a German OP and crawl ditch, and above that the main buildings of Fray Farm, floating on a hillside, in fragmentary disarray, improbable snatches of green glowing from the upheaved deadness all around. He floated, above it all. In a quiet void of cool air.

But came to earth suddenly.

The impact terrific. All the breath crushed out of him.

He writhed on the ground, his helmet gone, his arm hanging from his shoulder crazily; he teetered on the sharp lip of a cutback bank, blown out of a hillside. It was slathered with mud and littered with debris. The white stump was there. His breath came back to him in sips and gasps. He lurched up, and fell back down. He saw fuzzily the MPs prod at a man with their sticks, billy clubs a yard long, threatening him with pistols. The man trotted sullen-faced past, toward the attack. One of the MPs thrust a rifle into the man's hands. The attack going forward. Wafer struggled with that thought: *forward*. No room left, for anything else. He wriggled to a position half-upright, facing the MPs, who walked on toward him, long clubs in one hand, service .45s in the other, bayoneted Springfields slung on their backs. The straggler trotted past. He gave Wafer a sour look. The line of the MPs parted like the Red Sea at the wash where Wafer lay half-upright, stunned. The roots of the upturned white stump ripped at the sky like claws. They moved on, following the infantry line, itself following the walking barrage, Wafer fought himself to his feet and stood swaying. He took a half-stumble-step.

One MP shouted at him. Wafer felt a hand laid on his arm. He lurched forward, an MP holding him back by a scrap of torn tunic. The world reeled drunkenly, strangely, painless and remote. *Something* was clearly damaged. What was it? And who? He became aware again of

the MP, holding him by one arm and shouting at him, but he heard nothing—the mouth opened and closed on nothingness. He became aware then, too, of the shrill whistle in his ears, the ear-splitting shriek. And the MP's mouth opened wide. Shouted words, that Wafer could not hear. And conscious then at last of the twisted dangle of his own right arm, and the oddly frugal drip of blood coursing down it. Wafer pointed to his ears and said:

—I can't hear a damn thing. I can't hear nothin.

and he could not hear himself, except like an echo, inside his own head.

The world was all fire. Sky, wash, MP, advancing battle police, receding line-of-battle, all gone, drenched with a new, more dreadful flame. The doorway to a vast furnace open in his face. The heat was incredible. An oblivion of heat and noise. And then nothing. Everything went away. The world and everything in it, all in a piece, receding. And slowed. And seemed to stop. Reversed. Picking up new speed, on the same unseen track. Traveled backwards. Came back into him all at once. As before, his ears filled with that terrible, soul-killing shriek. He lay on his back now. He could see the bare, bone-white tree, aslant above him. The grayed-out sky. He heard a tinkling jangle, like the trace chains on a team of mules. He shook his head, to clear it of this new noise. And a vast, cavern-like silence had replaced the shriek.

A man sat a hack with a matched set of bays. He twitched his long whip in the air above their withers, as if he switched away flies. The horses snorted brimstone in their fear. Wafer had seen him before. The skin of the horses rippled and crawled, seeking escape from the whistling whip, yet still as stones they stood in harness. The man a pale man with dark hair. He wore a severe black hat, set on his head like a block of iron, and a good black suit coat, an old frock, such as a Preacher might wear. And a string tie, tied in a bow, hanging over a collared white

shirt brailled up in a vest, black also. The man switched busily at flies. They buzzed all around him, drawn to him. They crawled in his eyes, in and out of nose and ears, across his smiling teeth. His mouth full of rotten teeth. A dirty man, with a sugar-rotten smell. He stared at Wafer, and smiled a pristine horror. And he asked, in a very pleasant voice indeed:

—Do you see them, poured out on the ground?

and Wafer wanted to say:

—*Just who the hell are* you *supposed to be?*

until, that is, he realized no buggy was present. He fell back into himself. Like a patter of pebbles flung into water, ripples running away from a boiling center, scattered like a spray of wavelets. Wafer quivered with pain.

The white remnant tree, roots exposed, exactly inverted, dangling into improvident air. Wafer tasted blood. Smoke leaked from his clothing. He dragged himself upright, somehow; his right arm flopped like something dead, unconnected, as if he had nothing to do with it. He looked across the tree, and saw the MP who had shouted at him. A still body sprawled in the mud; and its hair burning, and most of its left side gone. Yet the face, bloodless and serene, stared mildly at Wafer, and past him, with soft brown eyes. Tendrils of smoke rose from the ground. Wafer's stomach turned over; he leaned, and vomited weakly.

He stood up unsteadily. He noticed, dimly, that his gas mask, all intact, still dangled at his chin. He started walking forward. He had no notions of courage, or of anything; barely even knew what it was that he did. He was a referent, co-ordinant with a concrete compass, pointing east in agony and confusion. He only knew that the last coherent thought he had formed had involved this notion of *forward*. It had also involved a rifle, so he stooped, and with his left

hand—*Is it my only hand now?*—took one up, from the cradled half-embrace of a silent man, with his face turned to the earth. He staggered onward up a mild rise, where the posts of the concertina wire stood splintered and twisted, with hanks of wire hanging like coarse, rancorous hair, the Xs of the double German posts crosshatched on the skyline. Beyond these, a smashed trench, where another body lay on its back, faceless in a coal-scuttle helmet, that seemed much, much too large. It was clear that a shotgun had done for him. A few other dead men in gray uniforms, sprawled in attitudes of random repose; a few others in uniforms of olive drab.

He fell into the second line trench, ten yards or more past the Bosche front line. He jarred up against its far wall with his shoulder, and screamed out loud with the pain. The walls of the trench here were lined with neatly trimmed lumber, held in place by uprights, but the far side was blown quite apart, the edge of the shellhole forming a sort of ramp. He clambered up that slope, trailing the rifle by his left hand, his right arm swollen now and sticking out at a strange angle, its color bilious and bloody and dark. He slipped down another slope, a muddy one; he came to rest in a welter of bodies, all wherried there, by whatever furies of chance and gunshot, fire and bombardment. He could not tell uniforms. All of them were brazenly, shamelessly dead. He fell again.

His legs just folded up under him. He lay still. He stood up, and started forward again. The soles of his shoes slipped on the yielding bodies. An eyeless face crunched beneath his heel. He staggered when a hand with curled fingers slithered serpent-like from underfoot. Bodies and parts of bodies in a scattered pile, no souls fled anywhere, but all here hovering, an inescapable stench. Wafer stood panting in the waste, the thick smell of shit and cordite, the sharp, bitter whiff of burnt flesh. He wept at what he knew. If no more than you or I might do, then

something still more intimate than love was shared there. He knew the portent, too, of profound silence. In his throat, he tasted the keen, metallic bite of bile, and a dribble of stinging vomit dripped down his chin.

He never heard the soft hoot of gas-shells falling nearby, wobbling at the ends of long trajectories. They burst in the omnipresent mud. The white vapor billowed and spread. Wafer stepped on a dead man's stomach, and the body levered upright from the waist, and fell over, leaking green sludge from a shriveled mouth. The smell of the mustard gas was a sudden shard in his lungs, a knife driven in the chest, as if all the air he possessed were driven out of him at one thrust, and he could not, simply could not breathe. Just as they had trained him to do, he fought the reflex to inhale sharply. He fell in the midst of the bodies, clawing at his gas-mask. He jerked the hood over his head, the straps tight, and sucked in the stale, filter-flavored air. He saw the tendrils of white gas creeping over the mounded bodies. He fought his way to his feet again, holding his filter canister with one hand, cradling it, and slipping and sliding, stumbled his way back to solid earth. Hands spectral or skeletal snatched at his trailing, unwinding puttees. Did they importune him? What could he do? Fair or not, he made his way out. He stood unsteadily, looking downward at Foret Ferme, the loop of the Aisne, the ruler-straight glimmer of the canal, and the high ground beyond. His ears had begun to ring again.

Not far away, he saw other figures running, another loop of the Aisne, that had as well be Jordan. Fray Farm was there, in the loop, nowhere near as wrecked as the rest, just as Gerald had foretold. Gerald was not among them, and just then Wafer had no thought of him. He gazed at the farm, and the valley beyond the trenches, far regions unmarked and green, though smudged and dim through his eyeplates, as if no day like this day had ever been. And he knew it wasn't

for him, could not be now. His place so near these silent ones, and indeed, he remembered little else. The air in his lungs tasted vile, and he wiped at his chin, and came away with a thick ocher foam, laced with blood. There had never been any other place than this one. His ears rang and rang, in tones no bell ever knew.

* * *

Wafer sat on the box outside the church. Inside, surgeons and medical staff worked feverishly on a rising tide of wounded, as if they sought to levee death itself, a river in flood. Wafer sat with his gas mask clutched in both hands. Now and then, he coughed weakly. His arm was bound up in a cast, with a support brace angled from his side to his elbow. Blood was crusted and dried around his mouth, his nose. His fingers were bluish and red, sticking out of the end of the cast. His skin, where you could see it, was elsewhere ivory pale, underneath a layer of dirt. He blinked sleepily at the passing throng. Ford trucks, mule drays, a few buckboards pulled by crowbait nags. He watched the mouths of the drivers working, a dumb show of gesticulate shrieks and curses, but he heard nothing at all.

—Say, Wafer? a voice said. Wafer didn't move. Gerald stepped up to him, and put his hand on his shoulder. At the touch, Wafer jumped up with a cry, and scrambled away, tripping down the stairs, to come up facing the door, panting, a stout length of wood ready in his good hand, legs so ready to run they visibly quivered. The box he had been sitting on clattered down beside him. Gerald stood in shocked silence.

—Don't you know me, Wafer? he asked.

Wafer stepped carefully back up the steps. He searched Gerald's face. Dropping his stick, he flapped at his ear with his one good hand. He seemed to want to trust Gerald. But he

was unsure. Then he said very loudly, —I can't hear a damn thing. I can't hear nothin.

—Don't you know me? Gerald asked. Then shouted, —Don't you know me at all?

Wafer shouted again, —I can't hear a damn thing. Can you write it? *Can* you? Gerald nodded slowly. Wafer clucked to himself, as if he had dissected the worm already. He dug in his pockets until he came up with a stub of a pencil, and a soiled and tattered order book. His good hand seemed reluctant to go where he sent it. So did his eyes. His voice was thick, his words misshapen. He lay the order book down on his crate, and then pounded at it with his index finger. His gestures were like a child's. He shouted:

—You're goin to have to write it down. Here.

Pound. Pound. With the index finger.

—Because. I can't hear a God damn thing.

Gerald stared at the order book. Then he stared at Wafer.

—What's wrong with your voice? he asked.

—What?

—Your voice. What's wrong with it?

—What? Gerald spent some little time, vainly trying to get across his question. Wafer waved the order book, pushed the pencil, and Gerald steadfastly refused them. He gestured, worked his mouth in a parody of speech, pointed. Finally Wafer understood.

—I got sores, he shouted. Every time he spoke he shouted, and the people passing by—so many in and out of that place, almost always different people, seldom if ever the same ones again, save nurse or orderly—turned and stared as he shouted. Yet the strangeness not so great that they paused, or offered help, while Wafer, oblivious, continued to shout:

—I got sores from the gas. The mustard gas! See? You got to write things down, because I can't hear, neither. Not a God damn thing.

—I can't write, Gerald said miserably. He looked at Wafer as though the end of the world were at hand. And perhaps it was. —I can't write, he repeated. Wafer ;leaned close and said:

—What?

and now Gerald shouted himself:

— I *can't*. I can't *write!*

—Can't you write it down? Wafer asked. He shook his own head savagely, miserably. —I can't hear a God damn *thing*, he shouted again.

—Just wait here, said Gerald. He headed for the door of the church. Wafer watched for a moment. Gerald gestured, and finger pointing down, shouted:

—*Wait*—.

and went inside. Wafer grunted to himself churlishly, as though some bitter expectation had been satisfied. Then he went down the steps, and got his order book and his box . He had it back in the same place, and was dusting it off to sit down, when Gerald returned. He said, taking Wafer's arm peremptorily, —Come here with me.

Wafer pulled free, stepped back suspiciously.

—You again?

—I got us some help.

—What do you want?

—Come with me, Gerald gestured.

Wafer asked, —Can't you write it down?

—Come on here, Wafer.

Exasperated, Gerald pulled Wafer inside. Wafer resisted sluggishly. He seemed to be thinking hard, trying to untangle some knotty problem, and as he was dragged along looked by turns furtive and wistful. They reached the receiving desk. Gerald fell into earnest conversation with the officer there. Wafer waited morosely. MPs, lounging nearby, observed with placid interest, curious to see what would happen. Then Wafer's face lit up, as if some solution, perhaps even to the same problem, had presented itself abruptly. He looked at once anxious and avid, as if he were about to impart a secret, or better yet be told one. He stepped over to the desk, and grabbed Gerald by the shoulders. He spun him around, and said:

—Hey! *You* know my name.

and Gerald gawked at him and pulled away as he went on excitedly:

—You do, you know my name, don't you? By God, you do.

and Gerald said:

—Take it easy, Wafer.

and Wafer stared intently in Gerald's face. He said urgently:

—Tell it me.

A whisper that carried. Everyone was watching Wafer, as if in expectation of violence.

—Wafer. Take it easy.

The MPs edged closer. Wafer seized Gerald by the shoulders again, and cried:

—*Tell* it me!

a terrible, suffering howl. He shook Gerald savagely:

—You *tell* it me! You *know* my name. Now tell me!

the officer came from behind the desk. He tried to come between them. Wafer flung him off. He gripped Gerald's collar and twisted, and put his face into Gerald's like a knifeblade, and cried out:

—Tell me who I am! You've *got* to. You've got to tell me who I am!

But that was to no avail, because if he himself did not, then no one else did, either. He was still crying out just so, when they subdued him. They strapped him in some sort of jacket, of a kind he had never seen before, that prevented the free use of his arms and hands. His bad arm they left as it was, effectively bound already. They locked him in an enormous room, empty and bare, with a table, and a single candle, and a globe of warm yellow light that did very little to dispel the Autumn cold. They left him there for a long, long time.

PART FOUR

1925

Hattie Wilson was there, the day that Jeff Rupert Sweet died. It was late summer, the dog days. She came to his fallen-down house, as she had several days a week, every week, for twenty years. From the slope of a nameless hill, it faced Comanche Ridge. She came in her buggy, drawn by her mule, Doc Bill, wearing her bonnet. All the years since Emma Sweet died, she had made it a particular point. She did not work on Wednesday of Saturday at the Robertses, or Sunday, either, so those days were free for her to do with as she pleased. She had worked for Mr. Roberts, too, in the years since Ola Roberts died, following her sister, Emma, only by a year or so. Waylon Roberts was by this time the richest, most successful farmer in all the Keechi Valley, the owner of a store and substantial acreage farmed on thirds-and-fourths, and also the owner of several highly lucrative oil leases. Waylon Roberts had been lucky in other ways, too; he had never become so feeble as his brother-in-law, Jeff Rupert Sweet. By the time of this Year of Our Lord now upon us, Jeff was feeble indeed, while Waylon continued to batten, in the solitary waspishness of his now-very-comfortable wealth. To become all the greater, with the oil field just coming in around Bryson, where he had acquired new property. A smaller field had started up on the Ray place, in the Keechi itself:, the portent, most believed, of still more riches to come. There were boom times in Texas; there were boom times everywhere.

Her own age advanced, Hattie worked four days a week for Mr. Roberts. She was paid for that. Mr. Sweet paid her, too, but not as much, nor as often. She didn't tell him so, but she would have done it without pay. She worked at least one day of any week every week for J.R. Sweet, who had grown the more in need of it, and sometimes she worked two. Who else did he

have? One of his sons was far away, and the other son didn't seem to care—or actively despised him. Would delight in his ruination, thought Hattie, and knew the why of that, too, and wouldn't have said if her tongue was to be ripped out, though that less from nobility than other, more commonplace motives, noble enough in the long run. Truth be told, she was too tired out by it all, and the rest, too, to ever want to tell it. The sorrows of others a most heavy burden, especially when they are borne in a silence so profound. All in the hope of your own salvation, praise God. And she *was* getting old—had been old a long time, truth be told—and sometimes, she had to take off a day or more from both. On Sundays she would not work for anyone, nor ever had, nor ever would.

She went to the Negro Baptist Church of the Keechi, away up the headwaters of Keechi Creek. A pretty good ride, that was, from Perrin, where no Negro church existed any more, nor ever had, so far as she knew. She had gone to that the Negro Baptist Church of the Keechi for almost fifty years. When she died, she would be there, at the Negro Baptist Church of the Keechi, forever. Along with such as there were of her forebears, and such as there would be of her descendants, such as remained of herself. In a weedy plot, shared with a number of slate or wooden markers, fenced with brush, and the graves covered over all with small and middling stones. Gathered, one at a time along the way, by visitors, and piled up almost like cairns, over pretty much that same fifty years; and the older the grave the deeper the stones upon it. Even the nameless ones, the number of which increased with the slow, one-by-one ruin, by weather and chance and time and sheer meanness, of the headstones left there.

In fact, a sadly large portion of the cemetery at the Negro Baptist Church of the Keechi was distinguished from the prairie surrounding it, by one fact only: its enclosure by that brush

fence. There were graves there known to all. There were graves there still knowable—if only by the human-sized, oblong subsidence of the ground that contained it. Only that there were so few left who still visited, or cared to visit. Hattie saw to the graves of her own people after church, every Sunday, and agitated the men of the shrinking community to an adequate upkeep of grounds and fence. She did this some months more successfully than others. She feared the day when at last, there would be no preacher, at the Negro Baptist Church of the Keechi. Praise God that day was not yet.

The relatives of many another resident of that ground, whose graves *should* have been kept up by relatives also, in Hattie's view, had disappeared. Scattered by emancipation, restlessness, accident, reconstruction, migration, whim, or the periodic visitation among especially the most capable and energetic, by groups known variously as the kuklux, the nightriders, the KKKers. The black community in the Keechi, descendants of slaves, shrunk steadily year-by-year. Those not driven away outright, were siphoned off readily enough by the lure of jobs with the railroad, or punching cows and packing meat for Swift-Armour, in Fort Worth. Hattie's own two sons were gone to the last, though they came to see her from time to time. The oil patch had arrived too late, and in Jack County, hired blacks too seldom, to make many young people stay. Yet Hattie herself stayed on resolutely, and a cowed, remnant community with her.

It all made her week a long and arduous one. To do all she did for the widower J. R. Sweet, and for Waylon Roberts, a widower, too, and for the Negro Baptist Church of the Keechi, and for others, and of course for the notably unappreciative dead. But it was not especially busier than she had already been, all her life. And J. R. Sweet *was* the last, at least in name, of the

secretly favored of the two white families she had labored for throughout that life, and her mother before her. The old man's own wife was gone. His youngest son was in Dallas and Fort Worth, a busy man and a rich one, who never came to see him at all. His eldest son and namesake was even further away, in California. No one had seen Jeff Rupert Sweet, Jr. in the Keechi for years, but Hattie had worked for the Sweets by her mother's side, in the decades after the War, when times were really hard, with another war, smaller but meaner, fought almost on the doorstep, and no money anywhere for anyone. The Sweets were new arrivals in those years, carpetbaggers, some thought, though Jeff Rupert married with a Franklin. Certainly, the Sweets had been much closer to the black men and women of the Keechi than any other Anglo family. The Robertses, on the other hand, had owned she and her mother both, her mother even before they came to Texas—her father was buried on Roberts land in Georgia—and they were all she knew, black and white alike, even if they didn't every way suit her. And oh, most of the time they didn't suit her, not at all.

She climbed from her buggy painfully and slowly that day, as she did increasingly of late. Simple things had become a tremendous effort for her. She paused before she stepped to the ground, and listened. She thought there must be something wrong—she heard the milk cow in the barn, lowing plaintively, and a murmurous clucking from the henhouse, which told her that neither cow nor chickens had been fed, nor the cow milked—chores J.R. still reserved for himself. But she didn't hear a thing else, and she should have. No footsteps, no banging of pans from the kitchen. Sweet did not come out to greet her, as had always been his custom, even when his wife still lived. Hattie stepped down, and labored toward the house. She walked with the aid of a cane, gripping one toesack full of food by its gathered mouth, laboring up the

fieldstone walk to the back door, her hand around the sack like the gnarled black root of an ancient tree.

She rapped twice with the head of her cane on the back door. Sweet knew to expect her; when he didn't answer, she felt it would be all right to enter, and so she did. She never had before. Not without his or his wife's first greeting, in all the long years she had come here. So she was hesitant about it. The habit of proscription was very powerful. The sense of something amiss became stronger still. She came into the house through the kitchen, with the bagful of groceries, and more in the buggy outside, canning and produce from a dozen families, white and black alike, collected by Hattie for the old man and for others; and cakes and breads and several stews; and a platefull of her own fried chicken. She left the bag on the kitchen table, walking through to the parlor, just beyond. She called out:

—Mr. Sweet?

and then she saw him there, in his rocking chair, his own cane held across his lap in both hands. His hands were as gnarled with time as her own. His face looked down at his hands. The mouth was slightly open and the eyes lidded. She knew right away that he was dead.

She stood before the chair some minutes, before she brought herself to approach him. It had not been very long, perhaps mere moments since he died. The first and clearest clue to just how narrowly she had missed him was on his shirtfront, a wet boutonniere of saliva. She stood before him for a long, still moment. She shuffled closer and stood looking down. She dropped her own cane. It clattered to the floor. She took off her bonnet slowly. Her face was impassive in its grief and sorrow. There wasn't time or leisure for tears. Small, stout woman that she was, she hoisted the body in her arms. He was light like a feather, shrunken up to nothing. He rested

in her arms like a child. The time had been wretchedly; the body was still warm. A shock of unruly white hair spilled over on his forehead. His rolled-up eyes were white slits beneath the lids. His mouth hung slack with the jostling. She staggered slightly as she carried him toward his bed.

His head rested on her breasts, brailled up in brown gingham. It nodded sleepily, like that of a child, in time with her footsteps. His slack mouth opened against her; the touch crinkled her nipples alarmingly. She hunched her shoulders to the chill of it. She saw the bed was a mess. To right it, she sat him briefly in his rocking chair, just beside the bed. Bed made, she lay him out and straightened him, folding his hands across his chest, closing his eyes. They would not close, but lidded still, open on a sliver of white. His mouth would not close completely, either—once shut with a click of teeth, it tended to part slowly, ending in a sleepy, befuddled look. She couldn't help it. Later, perhaps, the undertaker might glue them or wire them all shut—she knew little of such things—whatever it was they did. If there *was* an undertaker. How they did cost—she hadn't clue one to what J.R. might have left behind. But Hattie couldn't do much about that now, either. She set about doing what she could.

She looked around the bedroom and noted its disarray. She staggered again as she passed back to the parlor, where she retrieved her cane. She moved as quickly as she could, straightening the room to her own minimum standard of cleanliness. She leaned on the cane as needful. Her legs ached terribly, especially the left. Her shoulders throbbed with the effort of lifting him, even as light as he had been. Fortunately, much of the mess was mere clutter; neither bedroom nor the rest of the house were really particularly dirty. She swept, she mopped the mildewed and worm-ravaged hardwood, she dusted and straightened and put away and folded.

She swept and mopped the split and peeling linoleum rug in the kitchen.

That was it—there were only the two bedrooms, the parlor, the kitchen. It wasn't a great deal to do, she thought; perhaps and hour and a half. She'd long had the keeping of the kitchen, anyway, so straightening that was the easiest of all. The house presented a much more orderly picture when she was through, and she doddered back to the bedroom, increasingly disabled in her left leg, fighting it into some semblance of function. There were things she'd prefer were scrubbed, or painted, or replaced; but she couldn't do that right now; and she rested momentarily, leaning on her cane. Not once did she sit in one of Jeff Rupert's chairs, outside of those in the kitchen. She stood in the bedroom, looking silently down at J.R. Sweet, at rest on the bed. Then she retrieved her bonnet, and went out to her buggy.

She climbed back into it laboriously, and moved it to the hitching post set in the earth in front of the fence, where Jeff long ago had built a concrete trough, shaded by a mulberry tree. She opened the lid that covered this, so Doc Bill, her mule, could have a drink. She hung a feedbag off him when he was done drinking, but left him in harness. She took a flour sack from behind the seat, and used it to wipe him down. It was slow, toilsome, and weary work, but it had to be done. When she finished, she returned to the house. First she went to the closet, where the legal things—insurance, deeds, and the like—were kept in a metal box. She put the box on the kitchen table. The key was on Jeff's dresser; she put it next to the box.

Jeff hadn't moved—his face wore that slumbrous and confused look, as if death had caught him by surprise, and just upon waking, too. Who has it not? Hattie sighed, and mopped at her face with her handkerchief. She raised up Jeff Rupert's body, and beginning with his shirt, methodically stripped him. He lay nude on the bed. In the kitchen, she pumped a basin full of

water. She found a washrag to use, and a block of lye soap. She set the basin on the dresser in the bedroom; he was still limber, so washing him was not as difficult as it might have been. She washed him thoroughly, front and back. She washed his hair. She found his razor and cup and strop, and carefully shaved him.

There was violet water and hair oil on the dresser, and a broken-toothed comb. Such as it was, she found his good black suit in the closet. It was faded almost gray. She dressed him carefully, first in his least-worn longhandles, then in the suit. She polished his boots. Getting them on him was about the hardest thing of all to do, but she did it. She found a big gray Stetson in a box in the closet, and a brush with it. It was probably the finest thing he owned. She brushed it carefully. When she refolded his hands on his chest, she clasped them across the hat's brim. She found his cane where she had left it in the parlor, a sturdy length whittled from a deadfall of oak. She remembered him carving it down. She played her hands across it briefly, worn oily and almost black at the crook, and then inserted it carefully into the crook of one arm.

The hat lay on his belly, as if he held it there, patiently awaiting—something. He held the cane as though he stooped to a keyhole. He would wait with some style, and most patiently. Hattie figured the foods would be needed when the time came for funeral and visitation, so she ended her labors in the house by pulling the buggy back around to the back door, and unloading the rest of the food. She was peeved with herself for not having thought of that before. It would have saved her a few steps. She lay aside her cane to do it more quickly. Her left leg was still aching terribly. She walked now with not a limp, but a leftward lurch. This day was exacting its toll. She had to stop and rest. She did it leaning on the kitchen table.

When the food was put away, she retrieved her cane one last time. She went to the

chicken house, and gathered the eggs from the few remaining hens, and put them up in the kitchen with the rest of the food. They wouldn't keep long, she knew. You did what you could. The stew would keep for a few days, in the shadowed cool of the icebox, though of course, it had no ice; J. R. couldn't afford ice, not way out here. Perhaps it all would keep long enough to be of some use to someone. He hoped so. It could not possibly be long until the funeral. Not in this heat. All of that done, she went out the back door and down the hill to the fence at the barnlot and through the gate. There were still yet a few more chores left to do.

She went to the barn and milked the cow; it mooed at her gratefully, with intestinal sighs and rumbles and a restive squirming in the stall telling all together the tale of her vast relief. Hattie pulled some hay down into the manger, and she turned out the cow into the lot. She sat down heavily on the edge of the trough, raking sweat off her face. The heat of the day was building.

She looked into the trough, and saw it had at least a day's worth of water, and so relieved, she left it. She just couldn't fill it. She just couldn't buck the water from the well; her strength was failing her. She looked uphill to the house, thoughtful, recognizing again the growing heat. In the slippery white gravel of the hillside barnyard, her slow, stiff progress all the harder, she gained the fence at last, and stiffly walked back through the gate. It took her some time to summon the energy to close it, but she never in her life left a gate open. She went to her buggy. She straightened the tack on the mule, and clambered into it painfully. She settled herself, looking around carefully. She regarded her mule momentarily, and then barked:

—Gidyap, you!

and chucked him up to some little speed, down the hill to the road; and then down the road.

The road was dirt, paved with crushed limestone, dirty white, without a gravel or caliche base. A good road for the place and time. Sandstone blocks rust-red in the bar-ditch that rimmed it. In the dry summer heat the road was dusty, not quite smooth, and the buggy rattled on the gravel and the corduroy rippling of the surface as it picked up speed. A white, choking plume of dry dust laddered up the sky to mark its passing. Across the hills, into the Ray land, the wood derrick of an oil well rose. She knew there was an offset well nearby, but she couldn't see it. There were others, far on the other side of the Ray place, satellites of what had come to be called the Keechi field. On the well she could see, there were roustabouts, toylike with distance, moving around the pump house at some mysterious purpose. She peered all around intently. When she rounded the next curve in the winding road, she could only just see the top of the derrick. A man perched there. The growing heat beat down like a hammer. Her face was anew a sheen of sweat.

Hattie looked around carefully, until she was sure no watchers lurked. And then she hiked up her skirts to the breeze created by the buggy's speed. She sprawled in the seat, sighing with relief; her numerous slips, worn in lieu of a petticoat, fluttered at her thighs. Her bloomers flapped. She was ecstatic with relief. The Ray house hove into view. No man was ever saddened less by the death of a long-time spouse than Old Man Ray, that was sure. He and his new young wife were still in the old Ray farmhouse; it was widely thought, though, they would soon be driven away by the too-near stench of their own wealth, with those two new wells nearly in the back yard. Old Man Ray had recently built onto the house, garishly in Hattie's opinion, but would leave it flat to the prickly pear and jackrabbits, to keep his new young wife content. He had the easy money to do it. She heard the car before she saw it, saw the plume of dust it left before she heard it, and was respectably reordered and uncomfortable before it rounded the same

curve. It was Mr. Ray in his fine new Dodge, with the top down, trailing a plume of rising dust like her own but much larger, and she whoaed Doc Bill, and flagged down the car.

Car and buggy stopped in a confluence of dust, respective plumes merged instantly in a choking cloud. Mr. Ray affected a duster and goggles; his moustache and face were powdered with dust; he wore one of those mushroom-shaped motoring hats. They both stopped, and he looked at her from his seat expectantly. So Hattie clambered down from her buggy. Mr. Ray wiped at his goggles with a finger while Hattie labored up to him slowly. He smiled. His teeth were brown from the hard water, and from chewing tobacco; those of almost everyone were, at least to some extent. He would doubtless buy new ones soon enough. The dust cleared away only slowly—not much breeze. She had known Earl Ray since he was a boy, and his mother when she carried him, and his father before that.

Ray said, —Well, Hattie. What do you need?

She replied shortly, —Mr. Sweet, he's dead up yonder.

—What?

—Mr. Sweet. He's in his house dead.

She gestured over her right shoulder. Ray's mouth made a wide "O," his already strained smile abruptly crumbling. He gazed down the road toward the Sweet house. It was well out of sight. He took to smoothing at his dusty moustache with one thumb. He said at last, —Are you sure?

She nodded. —Mr. Sweet, up yonder. He's dead. I found him this mornin.

—Yes. Yes.

Ray was clearly uncertain what to do just now. Whatever his errand was, he didn't want

to postpone it. But here was a signal crisis, and knew he ought to postpone it. He twiddled the tips of his moustache. Hattie stood unmoving, staring at the door handle of the Dodge, avoiding Ray's eyes.

—Well, he went on. We'll have to get hold of his sons, won't we?

—Can you head back up to your house, Mr. Ray? And call the Marshal?

Ray scowled. —Do you know if Sweet had insurance? Do you know if he'd bought some sort of a plan?

—Plan for what?

—A burial plan. Life insurance. You understand? Money to bury him.

Hattie understood perfectly, though it always had sounded more like death insurance to her. She knew what was in that metal box. But the white man made his own assumptions, and all she said was, —No, sir. I got no idea about that.

—Well. Well. Ray fiddled some more at his moustache, and ran his finger across his lips, staring down at a single white rock on the road by Hattie's feet. He looked up at her at last, and asked, —Well, where *are* Mr. Sweet's sons?

—Neither of them been here a good while, but they got to be told, Hattie said. Junior, he's in California. Hugh, he's somewhere in Dallas or Fort Worth, I don't know right where for neither of them.

She suddenly locked eyes with Ray. Visibly startled, he plainly did not like it. Hattie said steadily, —It's gettin mighty hot, Mr. Ray. Mr. Sweet, he need to be put in the ground.

Now he angered obviously. He didn't like having the obvious pointed out to him, especially not by Hattie. He didn't like the steadiness of her gaze. He snapped, —I have *things*

to do, you know.

Hattie looked away. She seemed to ruminate. She said at last in a neutral voice, with no inflection of anger or reproach, no longer meeting Ray's eyes, but firmly also, —It's got to be done, Mr. Ray. And soon.

—All right. All right. His face flushed slowly red as he spoke, a rash-like redness that moved forward from the ears; and he chewed his finger, and his moustache, too. His moustache was starting to look pretty ragged. His eyes moved from Hattie, to his own house up the hill, and back to Hattie. He said finally, —You go up to the kitchen. You tell my wife I said you could use the telephone.

—She'll let me?

—Of course she will.

—Yes, sir, she said resignedly. It was no mystery that this was not her own preference. But she turned immediately from Mr. Ray's car, and plodded back across the road. She climbed laboriously back into her buggy. By the time Hattie settled herself in the seat, Ray's car was a black oblong at the end of a long, new plume of rising dust. A wave of dizziness washed over her and passed. It must be getting on to noon, she thought. The dust drifted promptly across the buggy, and brought an alkaline sting to her eyes. She sat where she was unmoving, building her strength. Then she flicked the reins and clucked up the mule, shaking her head and muttering darkly, and the mule lurched into a walk, as if her new and disturbing weakness had been somehow communicated. The dust gritted in Hattie's teeth, the folds of her flesh. With no one to hear her, she vented her feelings:

—Gid*yap*, you lop-eared bastard—.

and went on around the curve, to turn into Ray's drive, and up the hill to his house. Once there, she slowly backed out of the buggy. She stood for a moment, just as before she had drawn up her strength, as if it were water, to dip and fill with. She made a leaky cup, and she made a slow progress, around the house to the back. It was a large house; with slow and painful steps she arrived at last at the back porch. She stepped up the steps there, slowly and elaborately, one step at a time, her cane-tip emphatically thumping each step.

At the back door, she stood briefly still again. She rapped with the head of her cane at the door-jamb. She waited. She knocked again. She put her other hand against the house, leaning into it for support. A black woman, in a black-and-white maid's uniform, not young but younger than Hattie, finally answered the door. She was wiping her hands with her apron.

—Loreena, Hattie said thinly. How are you?

—I'm well enough, said Loreena. You?

Hattie started in to tell her. She *wanted* to tell her what the trouble was, and what Mr. Ray had told her to do. She wanted rid of the burden of it. She couldn't carry it alone any more. She wanted to tell of old man Sweet, dead on the bed in his house, that would stoke like a furnace in the heat of the day. He oughtn't be left that way. But somehow she couldn't speak. While she tried to speak, Mrs. Ray appeared behind Loreena. Mrs. Ray was dressed in a skirt that was much too short, by any standard Hattie had ever known; and a silly hat that fit her head like the skin of an orange. A cloche hat, they called it, Hattie thought; wondered why she thought about it at all, or this: Mrs. Ray she wore hair bobbed, in a style that everyone seemed to like now.

Hattie took all that in, and kept on trying to talk. Somehow, the words only hung in the

back of her throat; they wouldn't form in her mouth. Her throat and mouth and lips would not do her bidding. A tingling numbness started in her right shoulder. It spread down her arm, ending in her fingertips, like a hum in the bone, like a thousand needles jabbing. Mrs. Ray watched, frowning uncertainly, while Hattie stood on the porch with her cane in one hand, and the other supporting her against the door jamb. Struggling to speak, and simply unable to do it. Her mouth would not shape the words. Sweat popped out on her forehead anew. It sheened on her face but she didn't wipe it. Her mouth was open, and her lower jaw sagged, and a single drop of saliva collected on her lower lip. Her teeth were worn and brown. She drooled.

—You come in the kitchen and sit, Mrs. Ray said suddenly.

Hattie stepped gratefully and at once into the dark of the relatively cool house. She removed her bonnet, pulling the knot loose after some struggle, swaying a little, still unsteady. She clutched the bonnet in one hand and nodded her thanks. She still struggled to speak and it still made her drool to do it. Mrs. Ray frowned at the floor.

Mrs. Ray said, —I'm goin to telephone for a doctor.

Hattie paused, halfway to the chair proffered by Loreena, a little amazed at this, and then said distinctly:

—Yes'm.

as Loreena caught her up. She hadn't known that she swayed, like a tree on the verge of falling, but she did; and Loreena stepped behind her and first held her up and then lowered her gently into the chair.

When Mrs. Ray stepped out to make the call—high heels aclick on the polished wood floor—she was still more fiercely frowning. Loreena sat Hattie down, and brought her some

water. She felt of Hattie's forehead, and went to the sink and returned with a wet rag, and wiped Hattie's face. She leaned over and whispered, —You be careful, Hattie. You're goin a make her mad and I'll have to put up with it all day.

Hattie nodded jerkily. She sat at the table, silent. Loreena gave her the rag, then went about her business in the kitchen. Hattie sipped her water. She had some trouble raising the glass—it kept drifting off-path—but she had drunk it all when Mrs. Ray returned. Mrs. Ray stood beside the chair, looking down at her dubiously, and said, —The Marshal is on the way.

When Hattie tried again to speak, she again could not. She wanted to ask why the white woman hadn't called the Coroner. She wanted to know if that doctor was actually coming. And what could be done about her inexplicable muteness? And when might Mr. Ray return, to rescue her from all this? The numbness in her arm, the tingling in her fingertips had lessened. She sat in the chair, but when she tried to fold her hands over the head of her cane—a pose to which she was long accustomed—she missed altogether, pitched forward, and almost fell out of her chair.

* * *

On the back portion of the Ray land, in the hinterlands of the County, the drilling deck of Keechi Number Twenty-one quivered under Gerald's feet. The boards hummed with it, oscillating between the nails in the joists like plucked guitar strings. Gerald was driller and roughneck on the day tower, at Keechi Twenty and Twenty-one, six a.m. to four p.m., six days a week. He flinched at a particular strident note from the boards; and the wood of the deck groaned, subsiding unevenly to a brief stillness. He had been nervous anyway, of late. It didn't help anything, but he didn't seem able to help it.

He cut his eyes this way and that, checking, just to be certain no one had *seen* him flinch.

Doing that, he made eye contact abruptly with a roustabout, one of the laborers on the rig, and scowled at him so fiercely the man turned away, searching nervously for work, *any* work to do just then. The man walked quickly around the corner of the pump house at Twenty-one, tight in the ass, like someone who knows they are being watched, and Gerald's eyes bored into him every step of the way. Gerald bent back to his work with his own ears burning.

He wasn't afraid, of course; he knew that these were not the kinds of rumblings that ought to cause him fear. These wells were drilled with rotary bits, and rotary bits made rumbles of their own sort, very different from the cable tools Gerald was more accustomed to using. The Keechi Oil Company of Jacksboro, his present employer, eschewed cable rigs. A cable rig bludgeoned a hole, pounding the rock to dust and rubble, in and out and up and down, like fucking. Gerald had been used to cable rigs, just as he was not used to these. The rotary drill turned and turned, frightening in its implacable steadiness—no rhythm, as a cable rig would've had. Not that cable rigs were ever particularly redolent of nicety. He was used to them, and that was all. As he had once been used to other things, and had to get used to new ones. Being used to something didn't mean it was in any way superior. It only meant that you were used to it. Now he had to get used to this and to these. But he missed the cable rigs.

Keechi Twenty and Twenty-one were on a hillside, between the Ray and the Sweet homesteads, just on the Ray side of the fence. There were the pipes and hoses, like great crusted snakes, that ran to and from the wells, looping or straight, as chance and need dictated. None of the pipelines on the site were buried. There were hoses from the brine pond, uphill of the storage tank, to the new Keechi Number Twenty-one. There were hoses from Keechi Number Twenty, the producing well, to the storage tanks. Those should have been pipes, which should have been

buried, but it just hadn't been done yet. Stacks of sucker rods were scattered here and there. Other stacks of drilling pipe and casing pipe were scattered just as random. All three tanks were uphill of the old stock tank, that no animal Gerald had seen around here thus far—precious few if any—would any longer use at all. There was a sheen of oil on the surface of the water.

The pump on Keechi Number Twenty, the shallow well, cycled steadily up and down, as the great lumbering counterweights housed in the shed next the derrick swung on their bearings endlessly. The hoses were charged bulging with the glut of crude from that well. The pump was more for control than lift; it was a flush well. The engine that drove the pump coughed out clouds of blue-gray exhaust from the exhaust pipe, stuck out the side of the shed. All very steady and regular, despite the mess. Steadily and regularly belying, as schedules and plans always did, the monsters and demons known to lurk, away in the dark unseen, at the bottom of a hole. Gerald half-believed in demons. He remembered stories from his granny. Demons ought not to be tempted, yet here they were, living in a demon's house, and liking it.

At least the Keechi Oil Company of Jacksboro was worried enough about a blowout that they stocked a blowout protector, on-site, at Keechis Number Twenty and Twenty-one. Blowout protectors were not regarded in the industry as much account, Gerald knew; most especially not at depths like those of Keechi Twenty-one. This new blowout protector was called a Boll Weevil, New Model Seven, Dagget Tool Shop and Iron Works, Wichita Falls. But it didn't promise much better, nor look much different, from the eight or ten other kinds Gerald had already seen—but you know, you had to take some kind of precaution. This one had an internal valve, supposed to be a little different; maybe it truly was, that actually tightened to pressure. Maybe it would; or maybe not. The demons that lived in the wellshaft, as everyone knew,

demanded an occasional sacrifice. You did your best to guard against it, but that was about all.

Because they had insatiable hungers, those demons. They hungered for heavy equipment; for the capital, real, movable, or fixed, of whatever entity awoke them. Or for flesh; vampire-like, from time to time, they had also a powerful thirst for the lifeblood of employees. They were unpredictable, capricious, vicious—a lot like humans that way—so you wound up relying on certain intangible variables, such as the look and smell and feel of the bit, when you pulled it up for a look. The subterranean grumblings loud enough to reach your ear. The temperature of the drilling mud. And you wound up relying, too, on luck most of all. Drilling was not so much rational as intuitive. Gerald sometimes murmured an incantation, if only in his own hearing. Placate the ancestral spirits. Beg a little help and protection. Because, creatures of some kind *did* lurk at the bit-end, thousands of pounds of pressure their substance, locked down by tons of rock, the planet's own outrage tangible, below two thousand feet. Such creatures as a field would draw and hold, while it killed or drove off others. If the earth groaned in its sleep the demons wakened. You best give them respect, and if possible, a wide berth, too.

Sometimes your luck ran out regardless.

Gerald didn't think that would happen here. It wasn't really a flush field at all—a field with a whole lot of underground pressure—in spite of its over-capacity production. At least, it wasn't out here, on its ass-end; these two wells would probably just about do it. *If*, that is, Number Twenty-one turned out to be any kind of producer, with Twenty already pumping. But Twenty-one was a deep one, as deep goes. Thinking about depths like these was scary. Scary enough, that when the engine in the pumphouse backfired noisily—two sharp pops, like gunfire—Gerald not only flinched but jumped. Looked about shamefacedly again, but no one

saw. Or if they did see had sense enough to conceal it. He thought then of the war, and knew that wasn't the reason he jumped—it had been too long ago for that excuse—that excuse would never do, anyway. There were damn sure other things than the war to be jumpy about. And he *was* jumpy these days. That was just the truth. And he did have his reasons—that was true, too. But those had nothing to do with wells, or with what might live in the deeps of them, or with the creatures a well drove out of a region, either. As they had driven so many out of this one, and many another.

It was a gospel fact that damned little lived nearby these particular wells. The Rays and the Sweets, perhaps. That made Gerald chuckle. Nothing lived here that didn't have to somehow. The petroleum stench was strong. The dammed creek, the watercourse that nurtured everything, was itself frequented only by birds, and fewer of those, he thought, than ought normally have been the case. That's the way it always was, around a well of any size at all. He had seen more than one bird, here and elsewhere, dead or dying, coated with crude. He thought the slow creep of crude into the soil, such as he had seen many times, must flush out the worms ahead of it, as if it were a roundup, or what the old people back home still called a *surround*, and thus the birds sought the worms brought abundantly to the surface. In consequence, they would then blunder into the crude, and be slathered with it, and die. The damn stuff was hard enough on a roughneck. It was pure-D hell on a bird. They flopped and fluttered, smearing strange marks in oil on the flinty, denuded ground. Like letters in a strange alphabet, indecipherable cries for mercy or succor. And they died. But the demon in the well, rapacious, lived on.

Gerald yelled at one of the roustabouts, pointing to the brine tank. The man—Jake?—trod out into it, head down, visibly oppressed. Among the other crosses roustabouts must bear,

they had to keep moving the brine discharge hose. Abraded silt and gravel piled up in the pond, washed from the drillhead to the surface. The roustabouts waded out into the hot brine, breathing the steam and the kerosene reek. They prevented stoppages by moving the discharge to a clear space, and kicking down the piled-up silt. Gerald had seen water pumped into a well before—it was sometimes used to pressurize a blown field—and he saw, too, the ease and utility and effectiveness of the new rotary technique. But it was another of the new things, and new had made Gerald uncomfortable for a time now. The roustabout moved the hose, and he was satisfied.

Too much new too soon confused and confounded, even if some of it was good. It wasn't in the first place that he wanted it quieter particularly—quite the opposite of that—it was just that he had begun to want things to *stay the same*. Just for a little while. And they never did. Nor seemed ever would again. The "little while" changed—it got shorter. Soon it was like, he thought, to vanish. Then the constant of the world would *be* change. Wasn't it already? He liked the work, anyway, in spite of it all. (Hearty slap on the back just here.) Maybe because of it all. And he liked the power that held the well in check, the knowledge that could and did lay a demon, every day. Knowledge and power that would bleed power greater still, *steal* it, right from the hide of the planet. It was a good job, by most standards. So he drilled for oil, that would never, never touch the head of any king. He had been on the job here for two weeks.

They hired him right off the street in Desdemona. He had gone to Desdemona from Healdton, in Oklahoma, less than a mile from the Texas border. Before Healdton, he had been in Cushing. From Healdton, it had seemed a next logical step to go to Texas; so he went to Desdemona. Why logic ought to be a factor in the first place was mysterious—he had gone, after

all, straight from the Army to the oil patch, whence he had come, and felt as if he had never been out of it. That had been imminently logical. And yet, if there was any truly solid connection, he lacked the subtlety even to want to know it. Or lacked the desire for subtlety—which was the same thing as saying he lacked the subtlety. Some sort of answer might have come, had he sought it. He did not. He would not only never know, but also never know to miss knowing.

No matter. Healdton was where he had got into trouble. All of this in the space of less than a year, since his return from Germany, and the Army of Occupation. That had been in 1920, direct by ship to Galveston, thence north to a brief stay at home, in Medicine Park—*very* brief. His father long since vanished. His mother drunk, intent on staying drunk, intent on dying. After that, oil town after oil town, all pretty much the same, all pretty much ugly, and flimsy, and raucous, and crowded, and stinking to heaven of the stock-in-trade and its human servitors. But hell—*anywhere* was better than back on the reservation, with his grandparents, where he had always seemed, sooner or later, in the years before the war, to wind up; and more the pity because of it. And almost anywhere was better than Medicine Park, with his mother, where he had also always seemed to wind up. It had all gone well enough, at least until Cushing, he thought. For Gerald, it always seemed to start with the whores.

He stood at the drill, watching it turn. He measured the length of the drill pipe with his eye—in a while, they would have to use the elevator to drop in a new section. Bubbles of gray-white drilling mud grew and burst along the gasket of the wellhead—they would have to sink a new length of casing, maybe; they were still in the range of the last diameter. He'd learned his way around a rotary drill rig in Desdemona; back home they still used cable tools, mostly. He watched the drive chain, rattling along in its course; he walked over to the drive gear and touched

the pillow-block drive bearings with his hand—warm but not hot—and looked back over his shoulder, past the wood frame of the derrick at the pumphouse, beyond it at the engine that drove the drill, and the tank of clean water that fed the boiler. Beyond that Keechi Number Twenty. Back the other way, brine tank and prickly pear.

The roustabouts tended those, too—this tower had a complement of four, plus three roughnecks and the lead man, over there by the brine pool now, talking with someone from Keechi Twenty. Keechi Twenty was the producing well on this two-well, one-crew shift; it fed the two cylindrical storage tanks—full—the leveed tank downslope—also full—and the dammed reservoir in the creekbed still further downslope—filling very rapidly indeed. He could see the drilling mud, chocolate-brown just now, roiling the waters of the brine tank as it lifted the abraded silt and sand from the bit far below; a whirlpool eddied where the pump suction picked it back up, to send it back down to the bit. The brine tank itself, an open-air excavation, roughly oblong, was a blight of viscous, stinking, yellow-white liquid. Nothing lived on its banks, nor really, much of anything anywhere on the well site. Except the crew and a few unhappy-looking weeds.

He could also see the scorch mark left by the flame of the burner on the boiler—the mud was heated through an exchanger in the same shed; and that exchanger later used to cool it, when the heat of the planet itself, glowing up through the rock, a thousand feet down, was carried by the mud to the surface. The burner wasn't going now—two roustabouts were fiddling with starting it; they had just finished refueling. There were drums of fuel oil for the burner; it was not a shallow well, but the superintendent wanted the mud heated. It would be hot enough to burn right through flesh, before the drilling run was over. There was fuel for the pump engines

of both wells. They hadn't yet struck gas, or they could have used that, straight off the wellhead. *God*, he wanted this tower to be through—the company had a bunkhouse on the Ray lease, in a Motte on the pool of a bend in the creek, sheltered between two hills, which was comfortable enough. They had showers set up there. In boot camp, he had grown to love showers. He mopped his face with a handkerchief.

The added heat of the boiler, the drilling mud racing in its circuit, in and out of the bowels of the earth, compounded in the mind with the heat of the day to create a structure, sharp-edged like crystal, while the body hung in sweat-beaded stasis, that seemed little shy of plain madness; and madness the sometime result, out on a tower like this, the sun broiling your brains in your head, nothing for mile upon mile but the scrub and the prickly pear. He'd seen men topple, growl like dogs, reduced to pawing at the yellow grass, itself like the sun so frighteningly. The earth an anvil, the sun the hammer that beat it. Where does that leave a man? The crystal shattered, shards scattered through shreds of who you once were, and are no longer.

How strange, that there were houses so near. No one could choose to be here; the houses must predate the wells, *all* the wells. As true as it was, that any wellhead at all was new enough here. But hell, they slant-drilled them right next to the capital dome itself, these days, in Oklahoma City, didn't they? The house he was looking at, roof visible, and a snatch of wall, Gerald knew was that of the landowner himself. Grown well-to-do off his lease payments. Thought he was rich, and maybe even liked a whiff of naphtha, to make it seem real. Gerald didn't know about the other house; he couldn't see it, anyway, back up the road a ways, nearer really, and smaller, and fallen-down looking. You could see the tops of some of the derricks of the other Keechi field, way far away, on the edge of things, if you peered down the way the

gravel road went, where other farms were, and a little country church, also decayed. You couldn't see church or farm from here, either. Across the road, there was a ridge. They called it Comanche ridge, which made Gerald sniff the first time he heard it, and laugh out loud the second. He had been drunk the second time.

Trouble in Healdton. That made him think of the war, and this time, it made him angry. He didn't show his anger, not just then. He had always been glad that he was a talker—everyone expected an Indian, even a breed, to be quiet-like, and sullen, and most were, at least around white people—but he didn't *want* to do what anyone expected, least of all what they expected from a breed. He wanted very much the opposite. They did what *he* expected, consistently. He expected that his honorary whiteness, conferred by the uniform, would pretty promptly vanish after the war; and it did. Sometimes, some houses, some whores—the oil patch was like a camptown that way; always lots of whores—they didn't mind. Others, they minded and said so.

In Desdemona, within the last three months, he'd once knocked a little pussy off in the back seat of a Ford roadster, parked on the main road, in broad daylight, and *she* sure as hell didn't mind he was a breed—not that you could much tell, and half of the population of Oklahoma much the same anyway—and darkness could just as easy be a working man's tan, at least with his shirt on. What had been her name? Was she a brunette? He searched his memory. A blonde? Louisa? No, Brett—but that night in Healdton—well. She had been a brunette. He hadn't killed the man after all, worse luck; he'd been headed over to the girls. The girls were lined up like produce in a vegetable stand, the flower of the local houses. When suddenly a bulk intervened:

—Get out, chief. This ain't the place.

said the bouncer. And never missing a beat, Gerald replied:

—I don't believe I will get out.

and smiled. When the bouncer laid hands on him, Gerald slipped the knife out of his pocket, flicked it open by the metal tab he'd fashioned to the blade—heard it snick when it locked in place, a neat bit of knifesmithing, that—and slipped it, smooth as anything, right into the man's side. Slid through his flesh like it wasn't there. He pulled up, and the blade cut until it notched a bone. Just *slick*. The bouncer said:

—Oh, *hell*—.

and collapsed like a dead man. Gerald thought he *was* dead, too, at least at first, what with all the blood, puddling. But it turned out he wasn't. The man had lived—though be it said, not because Gerald didn't try—and Gerald left town the very night, one step in front of a Marshal, and two in front of a lynch mob. All but certain he had killed the bastard. They were still looking for him, last he'd heard.

He noticed the drillshaft was almost run out. He quickly disengaged the drill rig from the motor, and shouted for a roustabout and the other roughneck. The drive slacked off and they uncoupled the pipe from the drilling rotor. The roustabouts grappled with the new length, manhandled it into place. They laid it up and hoisted it in the elevator. They lowered it in, and they coupled it to the old length. Gerald steadied the drive while the other roustabout ran the chain on the new section of stem. He increased the speed and the drillpipe snatched the chain from the roughneck and wrapped it round and around itself, while the two gloved men held it steady with their four clasped hands. Gerald eased the stem down, until he felt the bit bite. That was a shock transmitted all the way up the nineteen hundred-odd feet of wellshaft, already drilled

here. They expected to strike around two thousand feet, a tricky hole, at that level, where pockets of high pressure lurked, threatening blowouts at levels seldom seen before. *Demons,* he thought but did not say. When the chain was nested down in the drill rotor, and the drive chain steady pulling on the pinion gear, and the whole rig settled back down easy into drilling, that was that, and everyone stepped away. Those chains had been known to snatch off a man's fingers, like an offering took where it wasn't given, offal to appease the moody spirits.

Men blackened clothing and flesh. Steeped in dirt and grime and crude. They threw down their work gloves to drag out rags to mop their faces, at last if temporarily clear. The rags sopped with sweat. Sweat that burned in the eyes, and burned in the nose, and the crusted dried corners of the mouth. They all went back to what they were doing. Gerald watched them like a vision, men floating groundward from his platform: something was in that. But he stayed with his rig. He felt through his feet, from down where the demons lived, the bite up from the bit-end, chewing into solid rock. Felt it grind. *A whiff of brimstone*, he thought once. Relished the thought. Ruled the devils.

A barbed-wire fence ran not far from the site; they were on the edge of the Ray place. He thought in a flash of McAllister, crucified on barbed wire. The chewed and flyblown carcass of a coyote hung on a post, where a farmer had put it years before. He thought in a second flash of running down a German trench, firing into a crowd of graycoated men with his Browning, the shotgun speaking again and again as other men around him fired, too, pumping shell upon shell of double-ought buck into that panicked crowd of frightened men, until nothing moved. That one, a series of pictures so quick, he couldn't say if they had moved, or if they had been still: a flash of memory. Man blown near in half clutches his wound desperately, as if he'd put himself

back together. They had kept up firing, until no one moved. Man's mouth open while his face shreds away in a bloody mass. While they fired, several men with hands out begging;

—ich kamerad, ich kamerad—bitte, bitte—.

but you could not even hear it in the din, and only later remembered, in a night darker than any before. Sick in your gut. And even with the nausea, boiling like a pot of tripe, Gerald *smiled*. His smile had the rigid quality of a skull. It would scare you if you saw it.

Killing a man. That was a moment like the heat. That was when he held himself within himself, like a diamond verging on creation. Imagine the *force* it would take. Imagine the pressures brought to bear to shatter the hardest thing that ever was, anywhere, anytime, into something *harder*. He never told anyone—he had first noticed it in the war—but when he killed a man, or thought he killed him, his dick was stiff like a board, and in that moment, that terrible, frenzied moment, he yearned like to bust for a woman, not like a person, but a cup he could fill. In the war once he *did* come when he killed a man. It was as if, on stealing that man's life, he had somehow made his own the more precious. That one had been Mays, the son of a bitch, and nobody ever needed killing more. He had hated Mays from the moment he first saw him, at Camp Bowie. It had been a real pleasure to cut his throat. New flash picture from memory: looking up from Mays' slit throat, to see Wafer watching. Gerald had wondered about that, for a long time. It had made him uneasy with Wafer.

And so he wondered, for what by now must be the thousandth time, what had become of Wafer. He knew Wafer was from somewhere around here close—that was the town he talked about, Perrin—this was Jack County, in the valley of Keechi Creek that drained into the Trinity. Lots of hogs in the brush, he'd heard from the others of the crew, just as Wafer used to speak of

hunting them. Coon. Rabbit. Squirrels. Jack rabbit. Possum. Mule deer. Coyote. This was definitely the place. He wondered if he ought to ask around. That lead to a moment of dreamy nostalgia, thinking of the single openly accepting white man he had ever known—even the guilty pang at his own arrogance, militaristic and occasional as may be, was a sauce to the remembrance, because *he*, Gerald Waterston, had been in *control*. Now, if they met again, would Wafer even want him for a friend? He knew well enough, the difference between then and now.

It made him dreamy. It made him drift, as he had done when he damn near ran the drillpipe out of the rig and into the hole, so part of him clamored for responsibility, attention, alertness, while the other dreamed. Dreaming was a damned dangerous thing to do. And yet he still gazed out abstractedly at the sky. That was when he saw the buzzards, wheeling around, at about the place where that second house was, down the road and over the hill; and he knew there was only one thing could draw them so, and wondered if a cow over there was dead, or a dog. *Something* was.

* * *

In Perrin, Brett Stoat, the town Marshal, walked up the street toward his car. He wished there were someone who could go with him to see the nigger woman Hattie, someone who knew her and could understand what she said—if she could be made to say anything. Elenora Ray had said the woman drooled, and couldn't speak. She even called a second time, still angrier and still more irritated, and said she thought the woman was drunk, which had certainly been Brett Stoat's first thought, and so far his only one. Mrs. Ray sounded very put out by the whole business. The Marshal thought of what little he knew of Hattie Wilson. He tapped the butt of his pistol while he did—a revolver, worn affectedly on the hip—thinking: Hattie Wilson. She worked for

Waylon Roberts mostly; her husband Ward had died a few years ago; she saw after J.R. Sweet, apparently out of goodness—Ha! Stoat saw Waylon Roberts himself, just ahead, stepping out of the café, picking his teeth. The old man always took his lunch there.

—Waylon Roberts, he called out.

Waylon turned, saw who it was—first the badge, glittering on the right breast pocket of his vest; then the ostentatious pistol in its holster; finally the florid face—and Waylon ruthlessly suppressed his automatic grimace of distaste, removed his toothpick, and grunted a more-or-less civil greeting. The man was the Town Marshal, fool or not.

—I need a service from you, the Marshal said as he approached.

—What's that? the old man asked.

—You know that Wilson nigger?

—Hattie?

—Yeah, said the Marshal. That's her.

—Sure I know her. What about it?

Stoat told him. Waylon frowned and shook his head. —Hattie ain't drunk. Do you think she might be sick?

—Hell, I don't know. *You* know her. Come on out there with me and talk to her.

—All right. Take your car? I don't feel like drivin.

—Sure.

—All right.

The car they took, a Ford, a Model T, said:

PERRIN TOWN MARSHAL

on the band of a shield somewhat crudely painted on both doors. It was dusty and uncomfortable. They hadn't gone far before Waylon voiced a belated desire to take his own Dodge, which was more comfortable. It was too late, of course. The Marshal spent the trip quizzing him about Hattie.

—What's to tell? Waylon answered. She must be near seventy years old or more. My Daddy owned her, and her Momma and her husband Ward, too. She left out after the war, when I was still a boy, but she come back to work for us again, twenty, thirty-odd or so years ago.

—How come she to leave?

—How come any nigger left? Hell, they'd been emancipated, hadn't they?

—Who'd she work for in between times?

—Lots of folks, I expect. Ward, that was her husband, he cowboyed some. Went up the trail in the 70s. Both of em good workers. She worked for old Jeff a good many year, in the house with Emma.

—Emma? That your sister-in-law?

—That's right.

—She sees to him for nothin?

—She sees to him for not much. She likes him. He's a nigger lover anyway, you know.

—My cow. The Marshal pretended to be shocked. He said breathlessly, —Is he?

—Always was. And a Red, Waylon said. Thought a minute and added, —In some ways.

—I've heard that, too. My cow. The Marshal was silent a moment. Then he asked, —Is this Hattie a Red, too?

Waylon looked surprised at the idea. He smiled then, a glint of his opinion of Stoat

showing through, and he said slowly, —No. She ain't a Red. Not unless Jesus put her up to it.

Both men laughed at that, though Stoat with some discomfort. They arrived at the Ray place, passing by the silence of the Sweet house, up on its hill. Waylon's home was just a little further down the same road, the church they had all attended for so many years just a little further still, and he wished again that he'd brought his own car, instead of thoughtlessly riding out with the Marshal. It had been no very long drive, however; they got out of the car and straightened themselves, and went to the front door and knocked. They heard footsteps from within, one set followed quickly by another, and a white woman's voice—*Hurry* now, don't be so *slow*, girl—and were then admitted by a frazzled Loreena, who smoothed down her smudged and wrinkled apron, and seemed almost to blush; this caused the two men to laugh again, as at a joke between themselves. Mrs. Ray hovered in the background. She grimaced disapprovingly at their laughter.

The boots of the two men thundered on the hardwood floors, and Hattie, sitting as still as she could, prayed silently that her voice might return. She listened as they came. She hummed the tunes of hymns, as she had been doing for quite some while now. They saw her sitting just so; not with her hands folded, pious, like a victim praying for release, but gripping the lap of her dress with hands like steel cords, rocking back and forth and humming, while she ran it all through her mind, arriving back unwillingly at the stubborn refusal of her own flesh to do as she commanded it. She prayed as she rocked back and forth, with a will to charm the speaking, as if a ritual more ancient might offer some effect. But it did not. Without preamble, Waylon Roberts stepped up to her.

—Hattie—?

and leaned over slightly, to bring his face closer. Not *too* close. He said:

—What's all this about, girl?

The humming stopped. She tried to tell him. The struggle was etched in her working jaw. It shamed her that she drooled, that her arms and legs wouldn't work just right, above all that she could not speak, worse yet that she now feared she might lose control of her bladder. Shamed so before white people, especially *this* old son of a bitch, she'd like to tell him *that*. It would be too much to bear. But she did drool and could not help it. Beat on the table with the flat of her good right hand, weeping, struggling to force a word that would not come. She felt the warmth of leaking urine, pressed on it frantically, trying to rise. Somehow, she mastered herself. She heard Mrs. Ray say primly:

—I distinctly heard her say *Yes Ma'am*—.

so that when Hattie rolled her eyes at the woman in a frank disgust she could not conceal, Loreena found cause to be elsewhere. Hattie struggled for perhaps ten minutes more, until at last, she did manage a sound. When at last it came, she said it over and over. Soon, the white folks were as irritated with this as they had been with her silence. She said:

—Eet. *Eet*. Eff *Eet*—.

again and again, and prayed to be understood. But she wasn't. It was all she could manage, and it was unintelligible.

—I say she's drunk, said Mrs. Ray.

—She ain't no more drunk than you are, said Waylon.

Mrs. Ray sniffed. Waylon grimaced his opinion of Mrs. Ray, and said, —She might be sick, you know.

—Now, she might just as easy be drunk, just like the lady says, said the Marshal. He pursed his lips, looked down, and tapped the butt of his revolver with his fingertips. Finally he said, —Let's take her on to town. Get the doctor to look at her.

Waylon grimaced a new opinion, this time of the Marshal. Hattie sat expressionless and unmoving. She sighed once, heavily. Waylon glanced at her and said tiredly, as if he had been over it a thousand times, and all that to no avail, —They ain't no nigger doctor nearer than Mineral Wells. You know old Dorsey won't see her. We should take her to Mineral Wells.

Naming the local veterinarian, the Marshal said, —Aw, Riley'll do it.

—Jesus Christ, said Waylon.

An exclamation from Mrs. Ray, which Waylon ignored.

—Jesus Christ, Stoat. Whatever she is, she ain't no horse.

—It'll save time.

—Why? You short of it?

After more prodding, by both Mrs. Ray and the Marshal, Waylon finally agreed. Hattie, still at the kitchen table and now weeping soundlessly again, was not consulted at all. They took her out to the car. She kept right along with the same two nonsense syllables, over and over and over. It was plainly getting on the Marshal's nerves. As they drove down the road, they came to the Sweet place; Hattie became very agitated. She kept pointing at the house, a plain white clapboard farmhouse, very much worn, but her arms and hands wouldn't function properly; they fluttered aimlessly; she couldn't hold either hand steady, and the two men didn't realize what she tried to show them. Convulsing suddenly, she slapped at the Marshal's head, crying out:

—Eee *ed*! *ED*!

and the Marshal shouted:

—Hey!

and Waylon took her hands in his own, stopping her. It had been a clumsy effort anyway; she never once connected with the Marshal's sleek otter head. Understanding something of what she must feel, but mistaking her motive, Waylon said:

—Good *God*, Hattie, the man ain't helpless. You're *sick*, girl—.

while the Marshal said:

—Ed who?

and she babbled it at them. Fresh tears were rolling down her face. Waylon turned his back and stared down into the palms of his hands, upturned in his lap. He read no future there, but a past he would have changed, had he the power. He had it not. Neither jot nor tittle of love lost, the Marshal eyed Waylon sourly, and cast a furtive and threatening glance over his shoulder at Hattie. He muttered:

—Crazy nigger bitch.

and a plume of dust laddered up the sky behind them.

* * *

On the hillside that afternoon, all was still. The small house showed no sign of anything: not agriculture, not life, not commerce, not death. Until from the powder-blue sky a speck grew circling. The black shape soared on enormous wings, pinions banking on unseen currents of air, turning in a gyre that did not widen, but narrow. A track that spiraled ever closer, gradually and steadily dropping, laddering down the sky as a gentleman might down a staircase. The gentleman wore formal black. The buzzard gracefully turned, an arial pirouette of surpassing

beauty, sniffing the stream of the air, and especially the fragrant message borne thereon. The product of the wearing heat of the day. Miles away were other dots, scouting in immemorial single-mindedness. Drawn by the same summons, they would join with this one, by and by.

Not so far away, people labored. Over the hill rose the wooden derricks of the Keechi wells, the roustabouts and roughnecks busy around them, the wellshafts piercing the ground like two straws in a soda. Nearby a black pool, diked in by an earthen berm. Two metal tanks. All three full. Trucks loading there, but not quite fast enough; the dike is already leaking. A steady flow of oil flows down an old water drainway, once upon a time the overflow of the stock tank, into the culvert by the gate debouching to the dirt road than ran to the lease, thence under the road to the creek. In its time, this tributary of the Keechi had been at best an intermittent, uncertain stream, dependent on fickle seepages and freshets and the infrequent rains, a typical stream in this land. Now it had a more reliable flow. A ribbon of naphtha-scented death, meandering thence; foul, but very useful indeed, if properly processed.

The creek had been dammed, with a second earthen berm, capped by rubble. The cap was laid up in a sort of rough masonry, minimally reinforced with block-and-concrete pilasters sunk into each bank at both ends. The overflow oil ponded up behind it, to a depth thus far of perhaps four feet. Three feet to go, and this impoundment would overflow, too. It smelled like a thousand fires there, all burning at once.

In the Ray house nearby, Loreena worked in the kitchen. Mrs. Ray sat in her parlor. She did not think of her husband. She thought rather idly of her idleness, a new thing in this land, a new enough thing for she herself. And so her days pressed her, sometimes heavily, as will the days of youth. The one like a damage that has scarred over; the other a plague of enforced

uselessness. Presently, she will take a lover. Though not today. Easier still to dream than to risk. To think trippingly of bridge games in Jacksboro, or Mineral Wells. Shopping in Fort Worth, or better yet in Dallas. This too will pass, by and by, and then only sin will do, to fill up the emptiness that waits.

The milk cow in the Sweet barn had been accustomed to a morning and an evening milking. Her udders were filling fast. She placidly munched on hay, from the crib that Hattie filled. Fuel for still more milk. By and by, and not very long, her udders will swell. She will make milk, as she had been conditioned and bred to do, until it is painful to her, and then she will make more. But that is the price of her odd-thousand-years, in association with the likes of us. The udders have been known to burst, on a milk cow that isn't milked. And no one is here to milk this one. One of the still-growing convocation of buzzards lighted for a moment in the barn lot. It stalked through the sunlight with its wings outstretched, inspecting the cow, hissing softly. It was as if it knew the place was abandoned. It was as if they knew what would happen, to an unattended milk cow. It was their job to know such things, was it not? The whole world his larder, while the milk cow placidly watched, uncaring. The buzzard leapt wobbily back up into the sky, skimming the lot all the way to the house, where its brethren awaited. They found the house very interesting.

Other birds kited down, to join the watchful waiting at the Sweet place. They soared in with every bit the grace of the first. They glide on thermals, risen from the baked land, more and stronger as the day heats; they stoop from the sky like raptors, but theirs was not a violent art. It was a patient one. The sun may well be a blistering, molten disk, which seems, for a time, in the stasis of midafternoon, as if it were fixed in one place in the sky. It does not disturb the birds

unduly. And of course, it was not so fixed as that. Though noontime *stretches* in the heat when you're in it, time itself melting, slagged down to softened, unrecognizable shapes, of minutes and hours and even days, sloughed into slag. And there the buzzards, doing buzzard things. All of them ratcheting down, in the same gradual and graceful way, the same narrowing, spiraling gyre, each on its own timetable. Independent operators. Heeding the falconer who calls them.

They thought, if they thought at all, that they would scratch the itch of hunger. They thought they would feed their young. And they will do these things, elsewhere if not here. Though the prod to make them stay is strong. They knew what was here, within doors; doors they cannot ever open, whatever else they know. Four of them stalked about the yard like officiating undertakers, or businessmen bent on closing a difficult deal. They may not love one another; now and then their crossed paths dissolve in a flurry of combat, the feathers flying, a hiss and a pecking lurch of heads like those of bald old men, naked and round. The delicious fragrance, which wafted from within, grew still stronger. It maddened them a bit. But the brotherhood in the yard, born to patience, grew still larger. By and by, by and by. Wearing down, from afternoon into evening. They only showed a little interest in the cow, by then lowing from the barn importunately. The hottest part of the day was past. It was time for milking.

* * *

It was the next day, pretty early in the morning. Wafer's mouth dropped open, with almost an audible thump, and his eyes blazed up, and he actually sank back against the door of the car—a luxuriously appointed Dodge, only a year or two old—as if confronted with something repulsive, when he said to his father, who was not his father, who had just picked him up at the Jacksboro station:

—You took her to *Riley*? You took her to a *vet*?

Waylon stammered, —That God-damned Marshal sumbitch—.

—*You* agreed to it. You had to. That mealy-mouthed turd Stoat wouldn't do *anything* that you didn't let him do—.

—Well God *damn* it, that's why I wired you to come on down. Now stop it, Wafer, I done the best I could—.

—What did Riley say?

—What?

—What did he *say*? What's wrong with her?

—He said she'd had a stroke. A little one, he thought.

That occasioned a few minutes of silence. The scrubby landscape rolled past. The dust smelled like bones. Waylon glanced furtively at his son, several times, before he assayed a comment. He said:

—He looked her over pretty careful in the cell there, and then he come out and—.

—Cell?

—In the Marshal's office.

And the strident anger resurfaced in Wafer's voice, —You put her in the *jail*?

His father, who was not his father, said defensively, rattled as always by his strange and fractious son, that he never could own, but never could let go of, either. Even if he did sometimes very badly want to do just that. Wafer's father said, —No! That's what *Stoat* wanted.

—What else did Riley say?

—About what?

Wafer gaped and snarled, his father flinching when he did it. —About *Hattie*.

His father gestured, fumbled, gripped the wheel still harder.

—He said she might get better. He said she might not. He said it might be quick or it might be slow, there wasn't any telling. He said we should give her aspirin. A lot of aspirin. She wouldn't take but two, though.

Wafer snorted. —A lot of aspirin. That's a medical giant. *Riley*.

He sat a moment with his bad arm tucked in the crook of his good, an approximation of crossing them. Then he asked, —So where is she now?

—She's stayin to home.

—Where at home?

—In the kitchen

—Did you even make her down a bed?

—I had her a bed put in there. It's *your* old bed, you know. From the lean-to. You always assume the worse about me—.

—And it's usually true.

The old man snarled at his hands, white-knuckling the steering wheel, and said no more. They drove on in silence. The old man drove the Dodge. Wafer had come in on the train, the early-morning daily into Jacksboro, from Fort Worth, where he lived. He sat in the passenger's seat, staring down in his own lap. When the old man had mastered himself, he said, —She keeps on sayin the same things, over and over. She said it all day yesterday and she's been sayin it all day today. I thought she might be hungry.

—Hungry?

—She kept sayin *eat*, you know?

—Eat?

—What kind of man do you think I am, anyway?

—Not much of one.

A long silence. Wafer looked furtively at his father's stricken face.

—A damned cruel one, anyway, He added stiffly. The old man's look was tragic, full of helplessness and fury. Wafer's face twisted, and jaw tight, he twisted the knife deeper and harder:

—And a liar. Did I mention that? A liar.

—I don't even know what the hell ever got hold of you, the old man said hoarsely. For once, he wasn't shouting. His voice was low and sad. —I never mistreated you. You ain't hardly talked to me at all, since you come home from the war. From even before that. It's been a grief to me. And you never even told me why.

Wafer kept his eyes forward. His lips pressed together still more tightly, the most emotion he would show. He said, —When I might've told you, you didn't ask.

—So tell me now.

—I got nothin to say to you.

—You've had plenty to say to your Uncle.

Wafer's eyes flickered. —How is he?

—I don't know. Hattie sees to him.

—And now Hattie's sick. Boy, *you* see to *your* own, don't you?

The old man sputtered out:

—God *damn* it—!

and Wafer snorted. The old man subsided into a molten silence. He was driving too fast, his concentration intense. Wafer stared out the window. The day was already getting hot.

He sat with his withered right arm out the window; the sleeve of the suit coat was pinned shut on it. Father and son did not speak again. They drove up at last to the jail in Perrin. Getting out of the car, in what amounted to a single convulsive leap, as though to remove himself as far from Waylon as possible, Wafer glared at him, and said in a hard, flinty voice, harder and meaner than he really wanted:

—I thought you said she wasn't here?

—I got to see the Marshal, Waylon answered. He's ridin out with us.

—Swell.

—Can you once be polite? Please? The man's a officer.

—The man's a fool.

Wafer waited at the car impatiently while Waylon went inside. He came out at last, with Stoat in tow. It was perhaps the third time Stoat had seen Wafer since the war, the first ever with any degree of intimacy. He stuck out his right hand, smiling broadly. His smile faltered as he switched, embarassedly and clumsily, to the left. Wafer's eyes flickered down to the carefully displayed revolver, up to look into Stoat's eyes. Not troubling to altogether conceal the distaste he felt, Wafer grudgingly took Stoat's hand in his own. It was an awkward transaction, and drew uncomfortable attention to the pinned right sleeve of Wafer's suit coat. Wafer's lips skinned back from his mouth; he struggled to control that. Sucked noisily at his teeth. The obscure style of commentary, indulgently rueful, avoided any actual insult. Waylon looked out into the street

in an agony of embarassment. Stoat, oblivious, said with feeling:

—It's a honor to see you again, Mr. Roberts. A honor. Maybe you don't remember, but it was me saw you off at Mineral Wells when you left for Camp—.

—I remember.

—We was all sure grateful to see you back safe.

—Ninety-five percent of me, anyhow, said Wafer. And climbed into the passenger's seat of the car. Stoat, still unaware of his stature in the present company, and pleased with the handshake and the conversation, brief as may be, climbed into the back. A beet-red Waylon Roberts entered last, settling in behind the wheel with a sour glance at his son. He turned the key and stepped on the starter. He seemed to be breathing heavily. The Dodge's motor coughed into life, stuttering blue smoke from its tailpipe. There was the stink of ozone.

* * *

When his father and the Marshal went to the new parlor, to hash things over and decide, Wafer sat with Hattie at the dining room table. Nothing at all had been resolved in the Marshal's visit; Hattie had remained mute, her conduct at the Ray's and its cause still a point of contention. Wafer thought the Marshal a greater fool yet, if only for the foolish assumptions he made. He remained all the same a great fool who held Hattie's fate in his power. And that gave him some power over all three. Wafer resented it bitterly. The Marshal remained oblivious.

The old house was the core of the present—these inner walls a foot and more thick, where the house had been expanded in the last ten years, and modernized by lathing over the logs and plastering between the laths. She hadn't wanted to come in here—the Marshal had questioned her first in what was still a separate building, and was still called the new kitchen—and she sat

now in the big house, at the dining room table, hunched over and rocking back and forth. It was cool enough in the dark of the house, but not excessively so. She wore a shawl across her shoulders nevertheless. She seemed almost to whisper to herself, but not even Wafer could puzzle out the words. Her appearance was a terrible shock to him.

When she walked, she walked slowly, and hunched over, like a cripple. Her back had curved to a permanent stoop, since the last time Wafer saw her. She had aged, far more than he was willing to credit, far more than he was willing right away to accept. But it was not to be denied. She sat scooted back from the table, Wafer close by. At odd intervals, she rocked back and forth more forcefully, and now and then vigorously shook her head, the chair legs tapping the floor front-back-front, as though she prayed with renewed resolve. Wafer watched her silently, his good hand curled on the tabletop. She managed now and then to get out a clear word. Mostly she said:

—Eat.

and a pause. She peered at him closely, eyes asquint. In such moments, she became increasingly agitated. She gripped his wrist hard in her bony claw. She repeated it right in his face:

—*Eat*—.

—Are you hungry? He asked her. *Will* you eat?

—Eat. *Eat*—.

which she steadfastly refused to do. When all of them had still been out in the kitchen, before the Marshal left, she had actually struck at Waylon, when he pushed a slice of bread on her—batted the bread out of his hand, to Wafer's great amusement, smearing butter across Waylon's pantleg in a greasy streak. The Marshal had asked incredulously:

—You let all your niggers go on like this?

and Waylon snarled back, wiping at the mess with a dishcloth:

—*No!*

looked at Wafer, Hattie, Stoat. And added softly:

—Just this one—.

while Wafer chuckled, leaning in a corner, his foot on the kindling box. The wonder had been she didn't hit the Marshal, too. Wafer asked her, pleading:

—What are your tryin to tell me, Hattie?

She touched her lips, shook her head, sighed deeply.

—You can't?

She nodded slowly. By that much, he knew she understood him. Her look was such as you might use with an infant, whom you knew to understand nothing, excepting possibly your tone. The strangeness of that layered incomprehension was not lost on him, nor on her, either. An inquisitive, encouraging expression, just like that, that the little he understood might turn out to be more than he thought he already knew. Eyebrows exaggeratedly arched, eyes widened, mouth held soft; she motioned with her hand, touched her mouth.

—You want me to talk?

She nodded vigorously.

—About what?

She reached out and tapped him on his chest. *You*.

—Hattie. You're goin to be all right, ain't you?

She locked with his eyes. She folded in her hands the key of them, as though she still

prayed. As perhaps she did, though Wafer could not have told it. She waited a moment. Then reached out again, and thumped him emphatically on the chest. Whereupon he sighed, and settled in his chair and started to speak.

—They ain't a lot to tell. I can't do some kinds of work, you know that. What I do is work for the city, in the street department. I'm a junior engineer, they call it. I got no college, you know. I got street crews I see to and that's about that. We keep the streets in repair.

She gestured for him to continue.

—It feels good to make things. A new pavement makes me feel good. I don't go out much. I stay at home mostly. I got a girl who comes to clean—. Hattie closed her hand around his forearm. She was looking in his eyes. He seemed somehow to know what she wanted to hear about. He went on, —Her name is Mildred. She's a young woman, yes. You want to know if she takes good care of me? She does—she cooks and cleans every day but Sunday. When I buy my new house, she'll live in it. The house I've got picked out comes with a servant's quarters—. He broke off. He evaded her look, but was drawn back to it. *What if someone heard?*

—Don't you think there's things you and me shouldn't discuss?

Hattie tightened her grip on his arm. She looked at him intently.

—You want to know what kind of care she takes—?

Her gaze did not waver.

—You already know.

—You ain't hardly the first, she said. Her words were slightly slurred, as if lips and tongue couldn't or wouldn't perform as they were bid, yet they did at last make the effort. She looked startled—her hand flew to her throat—this brief flush of words so astounding to her, so

earnestly desired yet so long in coming. Her hand flew as quickly back down to grip his arm again. This time she took him by his withered right arm, without noticing, without Wafer noticing, either, and she said in the same imperfect but perfectly comprehensible voice, —You're blood Daddy's dead.

His face loosened in surprise. He covered her hand with his one good hand. They sat and stared at one another, eye to eye, mouths just slightly slack, as if they had both been struck. She said:

—You got to get him in the ground soon, Wafer.

and tried to speak again, but could not. And he found that he could not, either. Because there was nothing to say. And there was nothing to do, but nod.

* * *

The luck ran out for Gerald's crew that afternoon, when day tower was just about to end, and evening tower begin. Both crews commingled on the platform of Keechi Twenty-one, which had been troublesome all day, locking on obstructions deep below, occasioning several times brief but terrifying tremors up the shaft. When the last shaking started, Gerald's hand was actually on the clutch lever—the last luck they were due—so he was able to shut down the rig right away. A rumbling commenced. It shook the wooden planks of the deck. The men of day tower at Keechi Twenty-one staggered, moving as quickly as they could off the platform. The evening tower people stopped where they were, gawking

Gerald disengaged the clutch, and stepped off and into the pump house as the drill stopped turning, the slack in the drive chain pulling down and reversing into its return side, dissipating the momentum. He killed the drill motor and stepped across and killed the motor in

the pump house. Both stuttered and backfired. He killed the motor of the mud pump, too. It coughed and sighed and was still. Blue smoke hung in the air as he walked around the rig, listening sharply. The superintendent wasn't on the site. Only Gerald and the evening roughneck were here, a man name of Johnson, whom he didn't know well. Gerald looked at the other men. They looked back at him. Looked *to* him, for what to do. Deep within the earth, something was grumbling. It sounded as if it wanted out.

—Go get that boll weevil, he said. *Now*.

All four of the roustabouts scrambled, and converged at once on a device like a double or triple fire hydrant, heavy-gauge pipe, surrounded by a thick lead casing. It teed into three different stopcocks, these designed supposedly for slowly bleeding off pressure. Maybe it would work. Or maybe not.

—You, help me, Gerald said to his evening tower counterpart.

—Do what? the man asked.

—Let's pull out this last section.

They were the only two roughnecks on site. Johnson helped him run up the section, uncouple it, tie off the last and lower it down, hanging the cable inside the wellshaft. There was a strong smell of gas, growing all around them while they worked. The roustabouts hefted the enormous weight of the Boll Weevil between them; he saw them, mincing pigeon-toed toward the wellhead. The wellhead began to hiss with venting gas, and the hiss deepened. The Boll Weevil was a heavy piece of equipment, and the men moved with painful slowness. The drilling platform lurched sickeningly underfoot; gas boiled in a wavefront out of the wellhead. He hated to think about the mess downwell. No time for that now.

—Come *on*, boys, Gerald hollered. The ground was rippling underfoot of the duckwalking men, the oddly festive shape of the Boll Weevil still slung between them. Some of the nails holding the planks to the frame of the drilling deck, with eerie metallic howls of distress, pulled out of the wood. The twisting of the frame on its footings extracted them one by one. Several boards popped loose jarringly, jutted from the deck at crazed angles. Gerald and Johnson and the others cleared the wellhead of the last section of drill pipe while the four day tower roustabouts, with agonizing sloth, hefted the Boll Weevil up onto the platform.

They clambered around it, slowly dragging it across the now-uneven surface. It caught on a board edge. They cleared it with a lurch. The deck continued to shift underfoot, tiny spasms telegraphed up two thousand feet of shaft. God knows how violent downwell. More nails popping loose. The howl of the gas increased. They feverishly secured the preventer to the elevator. They hoisted it. The wellhead flange was cleared to receive it. The Boll Weevil dangled above the wellhead, swaying with the heaving all around them. They sat it down in three jerks of the elevator—gas hissed eerily at the joint. They frantically lined the preventer up, and inserted the bolts with fumblefingered haste. One man started the nuts, while another with a spanner cinched them down, and as they worked the hissing at the flange died away slowly, but built up proportionately at the stopcocks, until out of all three flared roaring jets of white vapor. Water dripped from the cocktips steadily. The roar was a deafening three-tenor shriek.

The odor of gas absolute. Gerald was giddy with it. He fitted a spanner on the first stopcock, and leaned on the handle, watching as it closed with what seemed unbelievable slowness, while the pitch of the gas roaring out of the other two went proportionately higher up the scale. But it had to be slow—if he slammed a valve shut on all that pressure, even with the

blowout preventer tightening internally, the backpressure would hammer down the wellshaft, and then back up it again, and blow apart the whole well, and probably start a fire. He struggled to fit his spanner to the next valve. All the boltheads were secure, and most of the men stepped away while Gerald fought with the second stopcock. He slapped away a roustabout who started to close the last one. The man fell against the deck, exposed nails and splintered decking tearing bright red lines in his flesh, his shout lost in the howl of escaping gas. There was no time, either to explain or apologize.

As he leaned on the second stopcock, Gerald had to slap away a second man, and then the second man still a second time. The roustabouts milled around confusedly. The second stopcock closed with the same agonizing slowness. The roar from the last was an earsplitting scream. It seemed to knife through his ears, and into his brain. Gerald fitted his spanner to the valvehead and leaned on it. The jet of gas was heavier with water, water reeking of gas. The water, condensed at the mouth of the stopcock, dripped like tears. A nameless thing, give voice in the shriek and the tears and the raging bellow of the gas. There were puddles on the buckled deck, the oilsoaked earth, silvered the color of the sky. Gerald stopped four times for a count of ten, as he edged the valve closed. The shriek had run the scale, almost entirely out of hearing, a high thin piercing that rattled his skull. He was graying out from breathing gas—he could feel it. His vision leached of color. Finally, the last stopcock was closed. But somehow, the shriek still sounded in his ears. All he could do, for a moment, was stay where he was. He fell backwards, and men were there, dragging him away from the well.

He looked up at them, and he saw their mouths moving, but he couldn’t hear them. He sat dumbly watching while they all gathered around him. They babbled voicelessly; he was

totally unable to hear. He reached out and touched them. They moved, anxious to assist. He mounted the helping arms like a scaffold. He stood swaying dizzily, staring back unhappily at the wellhead, amazed at what he had done. He thought no blowout preventer had ever been successfully installed before. This was a first. He felt, for a moment or two, rather good about the whole thing, despite the nausea.

He bent abruptly over double, and puked in the dead grass. He stood there, flailing both arms in tight little circles, trying to stop, but he couldn't, and he couldn't stand, either, and went to his knees still heaving. He still couldn't hear a God damned thing. He could see they were still jabbering away at him, regardless of his condition, oblivious to it. Maybe he deserved that. The odor of gas was still overpowering. He could taste it in the bitter, sharp bile that scalded his mouth. As he stood dizzily up again, he looked searchingly from face to face. The mouths moved, and no sound.

His eyes were fixed last on the wells. Something was seriously wrong, and he knew it, and he was searching for what it might be, but hadn't yet found it. Was his wooziness, his sickness in the aftermath, misleading him? The earth wasn't shaking. The Boll Weevil had not been blown off, at least not yet, though he could see, now that he looked, a vapor of gas all around it, where it still hadn't sealed, or where its hasty mating to the wellhead was less than perfect. He could not hear the hiss and bubble, though clearly enough it was there. But there were no more grumblings from the earth. There did not seem to be any imminent danger at all any more, of gusher or of gasser. But *something* was wrong, he *knew* that something was wrong, and he stood watching the sucker rod of Keechi Number Twenty bob up and down on its boom, in and out of its wellhead, for quite some little time before at last it broke through to him. And

his insides dropped into his boots, the clammy contraction of fear.

Because they were inside instead of outside his head, he did hear his own words. They echoed in his skull boomingly. He knew when he asked that no one had done it, because he could see that no one had done it. He supposed he really ought to have a fit of temper, ought to chew someone's butt out real good and proper, for screwing up this way. It would probably be completely catastrophic, before it was over. But instead he asked it mildly, as if it weren't the place or time for the harshness he had used, and been used by, all his life, but a moment for calm reflection, and perhaps for stock-taking, too. There wouldn't be time for it, though, as it turned out, because time was something they had all just run out of. And yet it certainly was not the moment for the customary tantrum, and he didn't indulge in one. Instead he asked quietly:

—Did anyone turn off the motor in Number Twenty's pump house?

at just the moment that some of the gas—so much of which it hanging about—at last caught the spark from the still-running motor. The first bloom of flame licked out of the pump house. It was gorgeous, a blossom in orange and red, that portended a still greater flowering. Keechi Number Twenty went up in an enormous fireball, all the waiting fuel for the motors going up with it, and when the temperature was high enough—which it was, very quickly—the crude oil, too. It was followed immediately by Keechi Number Twenty-one, as the world's first successful blowout preventer was blown off, from the outside. And everyone on day and evening tower at the Keechi Oil Company's Ray lease drilling field, including Gerald, of course, was killed outright. It must have been instant, for all of them. It could not have taken long.

* * *

The car moved down a road that evening, that minded Wafer of France. Yet France had

never been so hot or dry as this. What was it, which seemed so strangely like it to him now? A better question: what was it that did not? Indeed, in France, had not all of this had been with him yet? Nothing so much in France, as America. The nose of the Marshal's car was just pointed into the driveway of the Sweet house, a long, weedy, rutted trail up the hillside. They could hear the bellows of the milk cow, from somewhere down around the barn. It was strident, and eloquent of pain, a plea for succor. He thought he saw a watching figure by the house, an old man, carrying a cane and waving his Stetson like a signal. The Marshal said:

—I heard that old milk cow up there mooin to beat all this mornin.

and Wafer answered sharply:

—So why didn't you check up on it?

and the Marshal stuttered and scowled, amid the cries of the animal. The subject was dropped almost immediately, as the car came to a stop. Wafer stared at the old man beside the house. They were all three gaping at the birds, roosted in the trees around the house. It had only just become clear what they were. His father said something. Wafer was about to ask if anyone knew the old man. The Marshal said:

—My cow, them is buzzards.

when the concussion from the Ray lease shivered through them, through the car, through everything. The blast of heat washed across the hills like a demon set loose. The long yellow grass blew down flat. The eyes of all three men goggled wide, with wonder and with fear.

The tower of smoke was like France; the orange glare of the flames was like France. He could not run far enough from France to escape it, any more than France had been far enough away to escape all this. Now he carried both with him. Towns, villages, regiments and brigades,

whole armies of ghosts. The orange glare of the flames—like a million bright eyes, all glaring—were neither France nor Texas, but something that got by well enough in either. As if the fabric of time and matter had coiled up, anaconda-like, on a fearful rage, only to release itself to some chance, and *reach*—. For you. He was in the car with his father, who was not his father, on the way to ascertain the condition of his uncle, who was not his uncle. Hattie waited in the keeping of a young woman named Bessie. A Negro in the employ of Waylon Roberts. Pretty and obedient and silent and easy with the yes'ms and the nassuhs. Waylon, his father who was not his father, was most solicitous of her. Solicitous of Hattie, too. Where had all this bonhomie resided before?

—I am not thinking clearly. I have not felt scattered in this way since—.

Some things do not bear remembering. Other things will not bear forgetting. How sad, that so often, these are one and the same.

—What waits me now? Something, encoded in the nailheads. Hidden in the crotch and truss, which I never seem quite to get. I am not thinking clearly now. The fire beyond the hill like a second sun, risen on a brand new day, a day scorched in its own fires *—And oh, yes. I had forgot to ask you. In what coin will these debts be paid?*

Who is the old man by the house? He takes his hat and he places it upon his head, with fearful gravity. He looks sadly backward. But nothing can be done. He is headed for the corner. He will vanish from our seeing. We will not meet again.

—No one speaks to me now. No one appears, in the bloodshed or the boredom of the day. I can replay everything, still it will bear no fruit of understanding. God has gone mute—.

That afternoon Waylon called out Bessie, whom Wafer, nor apparently anyone else,

including Hattie, had ever even seen. She would sit with Hattie. Secrets could still be kept, it appeared. For awhile, at least. Others long buried. Hattie still where she was, unmoving. Would not go elsewhere. How could it matter, anyway? Unable again to speak, except in grunts and wheezes and half-words, that even Wafer couldn't always understand. In an ill temper, at her new and perhaps final disability, but also determined to defy it. They rode down the road toward the Ray place. It was the evening. They might take a late supper, later, at the café in town. Hattie locked his eye fiercely. Bessie would not meet his gaze at all.

The Marshal, and Wafer, and his father who was not his father. All going, on Hattie's word to Wafer, to the Sweet house. Waylon, Wafer, and the foolishness of the law, all going down the road. The cool of the evening just begun to rise off the bottom, pleasant and clear. They came nigh the Ray place, where the petroleum reek was unbelievable. Sharp pungent jab of sulfur; heavy reek of gas, naphtha-like. They were all breathing shallowly, until at last they passed what had been the culvert of the creek, which once had flowed there. The smell did not diminish; it was strangely strong. From somewhere, they heard a whistling shriek. Exchanged curious glances. Shrugged at one another. They drew abreast the driveway to the Sweet place, and had just begun to turn in. There they heard the cow bellow, and the Marshal said something of having heard it before. Wafer said something, of what the Marshal ought to have done. His father, who was not his father, said:

—What's all that in the yard?

and the Marshal, distracted from his anger at Wafer, looked up the hill and was startled. He said:

—It's birds. My cow, them is buzzards.

The old man by the house held his hat at his waist. The top of the hill blew off. The

concussion shoved the car across the road, and flung them all like rags around in it. It was, in a way that Wafer hadn't seen in awhile, stunning. As if the whole of the planet, and all the life upon it, at once arrested in its motion. Wafer's heart poised in his chest just so; not as if it stopped, but as though it left off its labor to wonder for an instant, at all the things that were possible. Held in suspense; sustained in a moment breathless of disbelief; suspended in the moment of shock and of terror, and of terrified and brief belief. The earth shuddering. The Marshal's flyspecked and battered Model T, skittering and bouncing across the rutted road, like a drop of water on a hot skillet, and Waylon cried out:

—My God! Wafer. *Wafer!*

and the Marshal wept, flung into the wheel, and his one hand limply dangling by the wrist, as if it were a handkerchief he held, in great, racking, heartbroken, heartbreaking sobs. Uphill, the man walked around the corner of the house, and vanished. Wafer dropped, in one fluid and immediate motion, to the floorboard of the car. He covered his head tightly with his left arm, the shriveled stump of his right butted up as close as he could get it, his whole face grimaced in a set of endurance. He didn't see it; he could *feel* its plummet through the air, as smoking debris rained out of the sky. Every fence within the zone of that concussion wobbled down its lengths; some were blown over; others the gates blown open. Waylon sat staring with watery eyes at the mushrooming fireball. His mouth hung open in his awe. The car was stopped on the road, but the road seemed to pulse and quiver with aftershocks.

—My God, Waylon whispered, will you look at her go over—.

The Marshal's pale face was contracted in pain. There was the faraway crash of the toppled and flaming derrick. The other one seemed to have simply disintegrated. The explosion

climbed up the sky, wrapping in and in on itself, a ball of flame, a strange and horrible flower. More debris. Pattering out of the sky, like raindrops awful with catastrophe. Much of it a mist, falling as black, teardrop-shaped ash. Something thudded on the roof of the car, bounced smoking to the hood. It looked like a brisket left on the coals too long. There were ribs in it. It spun for a second or two on the hood, like a top, then slid off into the dust. It left a greasy streak.

—It's that back lease, Waylon said. Now his voice was maddeningly normal.

—I need to get to a phone, said the Marshal. Hot tears leaked down his cheeks, and he cradled his one broken wrist in his other hand.

Wafer unfolded himself from the floorboard of the car. He sat limply at the window. He looked up slowly, out and out further, to the hills of yellow grass. They were shocked anew, when they saw that the sky was full of black kites wheeling, a regatta from hell, squiring the day to its close. Waylon trembled in his seat. Wafer did, too. Waylon and the Marshal stared at one another, silent. They changed places, Waylon coming around the car and the injured Marshal scooting gingerly across the seat. There was nothing else to do, but put the car back in gear, and go on up the driveway, up the hillside to a hilltop garlanded about with looping, soaring vultures. They made the trip in first gear. The fall of black ash was constant. The roar of the fire was a constant background; so too the column of it, roaring into a tower of inky black smoke, that laddered up slantwise, higher and higher into the sky.

They parked in the yard. They could see the windows had been shattered by the blast. They could see, from this elevation, the smoking debris, peppered all across the sere yellow hills, still falling. Waylon and Wafer climbed out of the car. The smell hit them right away, and all three visibly blanched. Waylon made noises as if he were trying to swallow, but could not. Stoat

turned away, one hand still cradling the other, bent over retching in the car. He dragged a handkerchief out of his pocket and covered his mouth and nose. He lay back against the seat, the door open, trying to master himself. He made no effort to rise. Finally, in agony, he leaned out of the door and violently vomited.

While the Marshal met his Gethsemane, Waylon kept reluctant pace with Wafer. The step of both men slowed as they approached the house with their faces turned aside. Wafer looked back at Stoat, and then at his father, and stopped. And said to him:

—It isn't a contest. You don't have to come.

since it was no mystery that Wafer was the one who had some experience with things like this. Wafer and Waylon stood then at the back door, hard by the storm cellar built in the hillside, and Waylon was breathing in hard shallow gasps, almost panting. Wafer looked past the cellar to the chicken coop, the well, the outhouse downhill beyond it, the small barn. There was burning debris scattered down the hill. The fall of ash continued. They saw the milk cow down there, swaying on its feet and the buzzards under foot all around her, and the smashed rails of the barn lot behind her, where she had broken through the rails of the fence. The milk cow saw them, too, and bellowed. They could still smell the wellfire. Everything was embedded within the two distinctly different, but equally overwhelming stenches. They watched while the milk cow broke into an unsteady trot, coming up the hill toward them. The buzzards, wings full outstretched and scrawny bare heads and necks uplifted and hooked slashing beaks open and hissing, made way all around her, not impeding her exactly, but not letting her escape, either. They trooped enmasse up the hill with the cow.

—Look at her udders, Waylon said.

—I see it, Wafer answered.

They were horribly swollen, puffed up like balloons, and split in places and bleeding. The cow walked through the open gate and up to them. She butted at Waylon with her head. The buzzards stood in a group at the fenceline—the fence sorely shaken by the blast—like a gaggle of brokers in overtight black suits, waiting for bids to open. Waylon began to move decisively, as if he had at last been confronted by something he could grasp and understand, and didn't want to waste the chance to do something. He saw a small wooden box of about the right size by the door of the storm cellar. He picked it up and brought it to the cow and set it down. The cow turned to him broadside. She was rubbing at him with her side.

Retreated, Stoat stood leaning on his car, green with nausea, still retching dryly. The fire beyond the hill burned on, the smoke if anything blacker, denser, and reaching up higher into the air. When Waylon sat the stool, the cow froze, turning on him with what seemed gratitude her great brown eyes. He took two of the least-damaged teats in his hands, and proceeded to milk her directly onto the ground. The white puddle grew, until Wafer, who had been watching dumbly, stepped into the cellar and found a bucket. He set it under the cow. He stood looking down at his father while the milk sizzled on the sides of the pail. The pail filled, and the sound softened. Wafer turned and opened the screen and stepped into the house. The smell inside was simply hideous.

He went through the kitchen, then the parlor, and finally stood at the door to the bedroom. Jeff Rupert lay on the bed. Three or four buzzards sat the bed with him. Two of them were injured and bleeding, either by the blast, or by forcing themselves through the shattered windows. They turned their naked heads to Wafer. Their heads and neck were smeared with black, and the

smell here was overpowering, would have been overpowering for anyone. Somehow he stood it. He neither thought nor hesitated, but picked up the nearest thing to him, and started whacking the buzzards. They hissed and flapped their rage as he drove them off the bed and then out the door and through the parlor, into the kitchen, and finally out the back door. There was a brief altercation there between Waylon, milk cow, and buzzards. The buzzards lost that one, too, but by the time Wafer reentered the bedroom, two were craning through the shattered window, glaring at Wafer, and hissing. They were joined right away by a third. Before it was done the fourth was at another window, crying plaintively.

Wafer struck at them with what he finally realized was J.R.'s .410 shotgun. It wasn't loaded, or he would have shot the birds then and there, not that it really made much sense to do so. He knew where Jeff Rupert kept his ammunition, but he didn't want to take the time to deal with that. An urgency possessed him that might better have possessed others much earlier. Sometimes you just can't tell, can you? He stood over Jeff Rupert's body. There were tears in the vest and shirt that Hattie had dressed him in so carefully, and green and black smears, and two gaping holes in his abdomen. Fluid of some kind had splattered on the sheets and walls. The teeth were showing where the lips had grimaced away . The eyelids were shriveled open. The collapsed eyeballs had turned dark, and the eyelids had collapsed with them. His hands somehow still held his cane and his Stetson.

Wafer took the bedclothes and wrapped them around the body, just as it was. He picked up the body thus mummied, wobbling unsteadily, the weight overbalanced by his lack of one arm. He managed to grasp it tightly with his left, while steadying and somewhat supporting it with the remnant of his right. He walked out of the house and straight past Waylon and the cow,

into the cellar. There, he lay Jeff Rupert Sweet on the mattress of an old bed. He stepped away, and out, and closed and latched the door behind him. His father still sat his box, milking the cow. The pail was overflowing. He milked in a sea of milky mud, and the milk cow seemed at peace. Waylon looked up at Wafer. Wafer saw in the distance a procession of vehicles coming down the road from town. One was the RFD firetruck, its red light flashing.

—Never can seem to get it just right, Waylon said.

Wafer looked down at him. They made full eye contact.

Wafer said, —Who ever did?

There seemed to be nothing else to say. Wafer watched the black shapes of the buzzards drop one and two from the sky, to cluster in small, contentious riots, round about perhaps three dark figures, scattered on the hillsides with the other debris. Others of the brethren lingered, here and there, in clusters about the house; or fought one and two and three together, over some smallish fragment scattered also. An inferno raged across the hill, feeding what was now a fat column of black smoke. Huge, it broke and spread at altitude. The ashfall had begun to diminish. Wafer and Waylon, and Stoat at the car, waited all together for the men from town.

Comanche ridge rose across the valley of the Keechi. The Keechi Creek flowing to the Trinity River, the Trinity to the sea, shadowed further south by the Brazos and its tributaries. The sea awaited the waters of the uplands, where the dead yellow grass of deep summer softened in the distance. Far off there were blue distant hills.

Wafer looked into those. Where the silence could fill and calm him. His father milked, and he stared off at the hills, and Stoat nursed his broken wrist inside the car. Wafer thought he should help Stoat. Thinking that, all the anger left him; all the anger he had ever had; left him in

a rush and in an instant. He moved toward Stoat. He would rest, after all, a long, long while.

Asleep and silent. In the arms of the blue, distant hills.